

The Story of a Norfolk Farm



To
ALL WHO HAVE
WORKED
and
SUFFERED
for
THE LAND
and
THE PEOPLE
of
GREATER BRITAIN

by the same author



The Children of Shallowford

The Flax of Dream

Salar the Salmon

The Beautiful Years

Dandelion Days

The Dream of Fair Women

The Pathway

The Gold Falcon

The Wild Red Deer of Exmoor

Richard Jefferies

THE STORY OF A NORFOLK FARM

by

HENRY WILLIAMSON

Going to farm? My dear fellow, whatever for? Don't touch it! You'll lose your money. Farming's dead in England. Everyone will tell you that!—BRITISH EVERYMAN, 1936

We count it a privilege to live in an age when England demands that great things shall be done, a privilege to be of the generation which learns to say what can we give instead of what can we take. For thus our generation learns there are greater things than slothful ease; greater things than safety; more terrible things than death.

—SIR OSWALD MOSLEY,
March 1936

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I regret that it is impracticable in the present time to publish this book as originally written in the period between the spring of 1937 and the summer of 1939.

An author writes a story; but he is not entirely free, in some circumstances, to persist in his personal wishes for its final (or original) form.

The publishers have told me that certain passages, including an entire chapter, 'are not essential to the story of the farming venture, and they are likely to excite a controversial interest at odds with the main theme of the book'.

I have therefore decided to remove them: hoping that they may be restored to the text in the happier and healthier age following the end of the War.

H. W.

11 November 1940

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PART ONE: ASPIRATION

Chapter One

I GO A JOURNEY



One dull day in 1935 I went to London in my open car, which I loved. It was painted black, and all the seats were covered except the driver's, in which I sat as in the cockpit of an airplane. There was a sense of freedom in my car, which had a silver eagle as mascot on its radiator cap. It was fast, doing 85 m.p.h. when flat out, and it covered 24 miles to the gallon. These mechanical facts interested me, as once the precision of words had occupied all my time. I had bought this car after some literary success following the publication of two books: one about an otter, the other recounting what befell a revolutionary ex-soldier called Maddison, who strove against the pre-war minded, and suffered greatly. Both these books had made some impression in the small literary world of London and New York, which hitherto had not taken much notice of my writings. One old gentleman, the husband of a famous poetess, who knew or had known all the celebrities of the 'nineties and the Edwardian epoch, expressed surprise when I went to visit him, driving my fine new car. 'Fancy the author of *The Pathway*, of all people, caring for things mechanical,' he said. 'Are you safe with it? Won't you go day-dreaming, and end in a ditch?' He seemed to be serious in his affectionate concern. Perhaps his experiences with a poet who had lived destitute on the Embankment by Charing Cross, and whose verses were now classical, had led him to believe that the better the poet, the poorer the man of action. What was it, beside drugs, that made

Francis Thompson so inept a man, so great a poet? I have thought a score of times about it, about his lack of natural love experience, his unhealthy, inactive life, too: but no, I only know for certain that such men are born to sing, and not to be big business men. A ploughman, yes, or a carpenter; but never a man keen to make money in the competition of the market-place. Never a farmer.

It was with such idle thoughts that I drove across Salisbury Plain, by way of Stonehenge and the ruins of the hangars and hutments of an age long since passed into history—an aerodrome of the Royal Flying Corps in the Great War. The heaps of bricks and rusting iron lay in the midst of the long yellow grasses of winter; I saw them out of the corner of my eye, and touched my flying helmet in salute as the Eagle roared forward at a steady seventy. I liked to think of the ghosts of that far-away time idling serenely in the grass, playing Crown and Anchor, or trying to crank up one of the great 60 h.p. Mercedes cars which some young pilots of those early days used to fit with 40-gallon tanks—of course at the Government's expense. One month a bank clerk at twenty-five bob a week, the next a pilot at twenty-five bob a day, the open sky by day and the Piccadilly Grill by night.

It was curious how time slipped away. As the first rain since Somerset chilled my face, I saw myself going down to Devon after the end of the war, on a motor-cycle driven by a rubber belt from a wide metal pulley. How it had rained! The journey had taken fourteen hours, it was March, and I had set out from London without an overcoat. There hadn't been money for both food and petrol; juice in those days was expensive, nearly five bob a gallon. The rain had lashed down, and the belt had slipped; but I hadn't cared for the wet or the mud, I was free, this wasn't the rain and mud of the Somme or Passchendaele. Grand feeling, causing one to shout and sing as the wet trickled down the small of the back and around my stomach. A smear and blur of time, and here I was, making perhaps my hundredth journey across the rolling grey plain, and dropping down to Thruxton, where the wildness began to end and soon I would be at Andover and among the increasing traffic on the London road. It was dull after Andover, no longer an adventure. Dangerous to go fast; too many corners. I disliked going fast here. I

longed to know someone along the road, to call in and feel the warmth of welcome; but I knew no-one. Hotels were dull. I did not stop for tea, but went on, fixing my mind on the lighted bar of the Barbarian Club, in Adelphi Terrace, my base or home in London.

I was in my fortieth year. During the seventeen years in the West Country, I had written about twenty books, and become the father of several children. During the writing of the first books, time seemed to go slowly, yet seldom dully; and then somehow it was going fast, faster, and often dully. I told myself that I was lucky to have escaped into middle age. My sort of writer, almost useless for anything else in life except digging into himself and turning feelings into words, usually came to an unhappy end. If it wasn't tuberculosis or starvation, it was suicide or drink. Whereas I, despite several phases when I thought I must be really ill, had sound lungs, plenty to eat, too much tenacity to kill myself when things went wrong (as usually they did), and as for drink, I loathed much of it, it made me sick and then all the heart went out of me.

It was time to leave the West Country. I needed new impressions, new stimulations. With the exception of the salmon book, which was first-class, the last three or four books I had published, while as good as most country stuff, were not much good, although in time students would find delight in finding out about the author, from the pages. With what joy and eagerness had I found a new Jefferies in a second-hand shop, in those London days of 1919, when working for *The Times*, canvassing advertisements from suburban auctioneers! Usually a first-edition, for Jefferies was not properly appreciated: but how I clasped *Wood Magic* or *After London*, sitting on an open bus-top, while going down to Ealing or up to Islington, to persuade Messrs. Crawford Price or Mr. Fred Varley that, really, the advertisement of the house for auction should have appeared in *The Times* instead of in the *Daily Telegraph*: despite my conviction that the *Telegraph* was the better medium for such suburban properties. Once I had tried flattery; and bluff old Mr. Varley had cried out, 'They'll see Fred Varley in *The Times*, and wonder what's happened!' as he gave me an order for six insertions of his name, telephone number, and address in our

'Auctioneers and Land Agents Register', which appeared every Saturday. I thought I had been clever; but now, as I drove along in a stream of cars all hurrying to London, I knew that Mr. Varley had been kind to an obviously struggling ex-officer trying to do a job for which he was probably unsuited, and certainly inexperienced.

Strange days; then the sudden shift from Lord Northcliffe's *Times*, to his *Weekly Dispatch*, as Motoring Editor. I got this job after showing the editor an essay, in the style of Jefferies, entitled 'Meadow Grasses'. I half hoped he would print it on the front page, as the chief news item, or 'splash'; but after glancing at it, extremely carelessly, I thought, he tossed it aside and said, 'So the Chief's sent you here, has he? Well, what do ye want for your motoring column?' I said I would leave it to him, and got the lowest rate, three guineas a column. Thus my journalist career started, and all I had ever heard about cars was put into the weekly column, or half-column as it soon became. When I was bare of ideas, I invented correspondents. Thus one was replied to, 'Your leaking radiator can be temporarily cured by the introduction of oatmeal, which will thicken and stop the leak, as well as providing a warm meal for a winter's night'. After further similar advice the half-column became a quarter-column, and then disappeared altogether.

Those days seemed far away, yet only just out of reach. With a slight shock I realized I was now older than Richard Jefferies when he had died, and older than Edward Thomas, killed at Vimy in 1917. I was their senior; I had learnt more than they knew, judged by length of time on the earth. The joy and excitement on first getting Jefferies's *Greene Ferne Farm*! The back of the binding was broken, but his device of a wind-flower leaf was in gold on the cover. Perhaps he had handled that very copy, in the office of Smith, Elder & Co., the publishers. That day nearly every auctioneer I visited in Holloway, Hampstead, and Highgate was shown the copy, and told about the wonders of the spirit behind the prose. The queer thing was that advertisements began to come in, especially when I did not mention them. I found out that one man was a fly fisherman, and sent him some cuttings from *The Times*, without a letter or mentioning my name: just the cuttings. I avoided his office, and

something came in later on from his firm. So I sat about in public parks, writing my first novel, and did not bother them any more. A few weeks later I was a Motoring Editor, and a few weeks after that the article ceased to be printed and I quit Fleet Street and went down to Devon on my motor-bike in the rain.

There was no Great West Road in those days, with its cliffs and pinnacles of illumined white factories sliding past the eyes of the intent, speeding motorist. To-day this was a dangerous road; cars raced three abreast, cutting over the white line, and sometimes meeting another trio travelling the opposite way. I found myself one of three, and dropped back; I would not compete with the commercial travellers in their closed American cars, which anyway could accelerate faster than I could, though they would be on the scrap heap two or three times before the Silver Eagle joined them.

I was forty years of age. What to do with myself? Jefferies had been unread for years. I knew it all now, that was the trouble. In those twenty books were all I knew, I had emptied myself out in them. A million brain-cell impressions had gone out of my head into words, and it seemed my life was finished.

What was I doing, sitting in this car, turning into the glaring and metallic mass of movement of Hammersmith Broadway? I had left Devon, because there was nothing to do with myself down there. Day after day was the same, walking to the Deer Park bridge, staring at the flood waters, walking up the river bank, seeing the spraints of the otter who always touched by the big ant-hill, seeing the same old heron rising with leisurely alarm three hundred yards away up river, to beat his wide grey wings to the oak-trees at the bottom of Bremridge hill, watching in the treetop until I had gone back again, the way I had come. No stimulation left in the valley; all the excitement of staring at salmon, and discovering about them, and the river, was in *Salar*. My life there was a closed book. It lived and would live, I knew that; for the life in that book was my life, which had gone out of me.

As usual, the arrival at the Barbarian Club was anti-climax. I could not mix properly with the men at the bar; I wanted to, but there was a difference I felt between us. Our worlds were different. They were always pleasant, and I liked them, but could not feel myself going out to them. They were townsmen,

and I was most parts of a countryman. It was the same in the country: among countrymen I was a part townsman. The man I felt freest, happiest with was dead a few months before, killed in a motor-cycle accident. He had written, of his life in the R.A.F. under an assumed name, *I like these fellows enormously. We are really the same kind of creature or would have been if I'd had a natural life, and not a mori of experience—and the nearer I can creep back towards them the safer I feel. They give one a root in the ground.*

I sat in the bar of the Barbarian Club, wondering what to do with myself. Two hundred miles of fast motoring, and this was what I had come up for, to drink a pint of beer, that I didn't want, and just sit around.

. . . . *And the nearer I can creep back towards them . . .* How often had one been asked the question, Why had Lawrence joined the Air Force, and the questioner not listened to the answer. They always thought he was different from themselves; that their hopes and fears and inner selves were inferior to his; and so they thought of him as different. Even now, when the broken temples of his brain were six months in the darkness of tree-roots, some of these journalist and scenario writers thought the accident was a put-up job of the Secret Service, while the real Lawrence was doing some special work in Europe, or Asia, beyond the comprehension of ordinary men like themselves.

I supposed I should sit there another hour, then go into the supper-room, then go to the talkies. I liked talkies, and secretly envied those scenario writers and journalists who knew film stars intimately and who went to gay parties. In the talkies I could forget myself, and live in the sparkle and space of beauty, gaiety, and *life*. I'd get in early this time, and not have to stand at the back, as usually I did. Yet I stayed in the bar, drinking beer I didn't want, while the smoke thickened and the laughter grew louder. Then, 'You're wanted on the telephone, sir,' said the page boy, in my ear.

'Hullo,' said the voice of Dick, my publisher. 'Come and dine, won't you? We'd love to see you. To-morrow we're going to Norfolk, to stay a few days in the cottage. Won't you come too?'

Ten minutes later I was drinking sherry in his Gower Street house, holding out my hands to the blaze of his fire, and feeling happy to be there.

Chapter Two

I REVISIT OLD SCENES



Now that I had an objective, something to look forward to, I was in no hurry to leave London. Dick suggested that we should all go to Norfolk together, in his large closed car. I pleaded engagements in Fleet Street, and asked if I might come on to him in two or three days' time. Of course, he said; and I felt relief that I had no need to do anything immediately.

For two days I enjoyed myself in London, talking with acquaintances and friends, once in the Café Cosmopolia—and swearing after the visit that I would never go to the place again—and then I got my bag and leather coat and helmet and set off across London to the Seven Sisters Road and the exit by Epping Forest.

I was well pleased with life. The book about the salmon, which had sold ten thousand copies between the October publishing and the Christmas just past, was still selling. It had been exhausting to write, and I had had to cut it short, every word being 'chipped from the breastbone'. All the while I had been writing it, too, the thought had haunted me that it might be a flop, and then Dick would lose the £750 he had given me to do it. A whole book about a fish! Who would read it, so painfully detailed, so matter-of-fact the descriptions of water, stones, moss, waves, currents, and trees. Thank God I had not let him down, the book had earned the £750 before Christmas, and was now selling slightly but steadily.

I could not face writing another book just yet, although I had a grand subject, in a part of England unknown to me, where I must live at least a year to get the local feeling and facts.

I was pleased with myself that I was driving quietly, without

impatience. There was much traffic out of London, and I kept my place, driving on the engine and not on the brakes. The sun was shining; the silver eagle was polished: I had done it myself that morning. So, without hurry, and yet quickly it seemed, I was turning into the main road to Epping and Chelmsford.

Nearly twenty-four years ago I had come along this way on a bicycle, a schoolboy setting out alone to reach the Norfolk coast, where, in a small fishing village, my mother and sisters were staying for August and part of September. I recalled the roads of those days, untarred and dusty, with cart ruts in places hardened off and flattened by other wheels. I was cycling along, when I noticed a man behind me, on a bike with very low handlebars: a type of machine which I regarded, without actually formulating the thought, as belonging to a bad companion. A bad companion was something I was afraid of. I had been warned of bad companions by my mother, before I left London.

The man following me had a dark moustache, with pointed ends. He wore cycling knickerbockers, I noticed as I turned round hastily to get a glimpse of him. He was a sinister figure, obviously. Why was he following me? A kidnapper? I pedalled on fast. I got into top-gear—it was a new bicycle with three speeds—and thrust my hardest. O horror, the man with the dark moustaches and pointed cycling shoes was just behind me, his front wheel almost touching mine! I free-wheeled, and then slowed up. When I dared another backward glance, he was still there, now pedalling slowly, as I was. Soon I stopped, pretending to feel the back tyre. He stopped too.

‘I was getting you to pace me,’ he said.

‘Oh,’ I heard myself saying.

‘Going far?’

Perhaps if I told him I was going to stay the night somewhere on the road, might he not follow me and perhaps rob me? I had eight shillings in my pocket, in my purse. His eyes were close together, I must be careful.

‘Oh, just out for a spin.’

‘I’m practising for a race,’ he said, ‘and if you don’t object, I’d like to keep by your wheel for a mile or two. I belong to the Waltham Wanderers, and we have a road race with the Romford Rovers next Saturday.’

'Oh, I see.'

'I'll pace you after a bit, if you like.'

This he did after a mile. I tried to keep my front wheel an inch off his back-wheel rim, as he had instructed me. Unfortunately I touched his wheel, and fell off, scraping hand and knee. He insisted on standing me a ginger beer, and afterwards went back, saying he worked in an hotel, and it was time to get back to the kitchen for lunch. So, to my relief, I found myself alone again. I was always happiest when alone.

That August of 1912 was hot. The trees growing by the way-side had dusty leaves. Occasionally a motor-car, about two an hour, chugged towards me, leaving a thick fog of dust behind it, but none overtook me on my trusty 'Swift' three-speeder. I passed brick and timber cottages, with damson-trees growing in the gardens: a boy dressed in a dark blue Norfolk suit and breeches, stockings, and brown shoes, very thin and bony.

My ambition was to stay at school for always, not that I liked school, but because I wanted always to be able to be in the country and watch birds. I wanted to be a farmer, vaguely, if I must be something. The picture of myself as farmer was always the same, and very simple: wandering with a gun under my arm, slowly, meditatively, across a field, as the sun was setting. I supposed I would be after rabbits; though the gun was always under my arm, and I was thinking of boyhood days gone for ever. I was fifteen, and still sang treble in the school choir.

This February morning I went into Chelmsford, in search of memories of my young cycling self; but the place was unrecognizable, with its chain stores and cinemas and traffic. It was a Londonized country town, and I went on to Colchester, recognizing with a start the obelisk I had stared at as a boy, and noted in my diary, to Royalists shot by General Fairfax in 1648.

After lunch of bread and cheese and home-made pickled onions with beer in a small pub, I went on, having noted that a few miles away was the village where I had, on that bicycle journey, watched my first otter hunt. I thought I would go and see the mill and the reedy water where I had lingered on that summer day so long ago. For two hours the new bike had lain against a haystack, covered with wisps of hay (against thieves) while I had walked about on the banks and watched, with others,

red-and-blue uniformed men cracking whips, wet hounds running about, baying, while the huntsman blew short notes on a little copper horn. I did not see the animal they were hunting, but only strings of bubbles rising from the dark water as the unseen beast crossed from one reed-bed to another. I had a talk with the miller, whose hat and face and shoulders were covered with flour, and he told me about the otter, and how it could breathe under water, just as well as on land. He said it went in winter deep into the mud, and lay there asleep with the swallows, which also disappeared in the autumn. I told him the swallows went to Africa. I don't believe it, he said, and can you prove it? Well, I said, there was a cigarette-card series out just then, Fifty-two Birds of the British Isles, and on the back of the one about the swallow, he would find the information printed. Not him, he replied, he did not smoke, or drink either, as both were sinful things. I did not find what he said very interesting, and went back to look at the hunting, though very soon it also became uninteresting, and I looked for old nests—old, alas, now that the spring was gone for ever—in the bushes on an islet, finding a bullfinch's, with one addled egg, but cracked. It was no good; and I had never found a bullfinch's before! Though of course an old nest with an addled egg, even if unchipped, and capable of being blown and washed, wasn't the same as finding a real bullfinch's.

Was this the mill? This sombre shut-up semi-ruin beside the road? I sat in the car, wondering if I should get out. Wasn't I being rather silly, stopping by an old mill, which had served its day? What was the good of going back into the past, and a two-hour past of a small boy cycling to a fishing village on the Norfolk coast? This faded brick building, what did it mean to me, really? The whole history of England, of the world, of nature, was change and decay and new growth. The windows were no longer even a target for small boys' stones, and someone had white-washed a crude device on the door, with the words, *Stand by the King*. This was probably done in the days before the abdication of Edward VIII.

It seemed a pity that all the old water-mills were becoming derelict, and that the old-fashioned home-grown wheaten loaf was no longer to be bought, except in special places, perhaps, in

the West End of London. The modern milling process removed the valuable golden skin of the wheat berry, and the white flour left was almost without feeding value. Most of the mills were at the ports, handy for grinding corn which came from America, Australia, and the Argentine. Someone had told me that the poor teeth of most working-class children to-day were due to lack of lime on the fields, and also to the white flour, which, in an experiment at Cambridge, had shown that rats, fed on it exclusively for three months, had died of various diseases all brought on by malnutrition.

I allowed myself one more meditative looking-back, at a small red-brick inn at Scole, half-way between Ipswich and Norwich. Here at the end of the day's cycling I had swung my leg over the saddle and glided to the open door. Could I have a bed for the night? On the advice of the cyclist I had paced that morning, I asked to see the bedroom; and while the landlady stood there, I turned back the sheets. Why did I do that, she asked. I was abashed; and did not like to say that I had been advised to do this, to see if the bed were clean. She was amused at my silence, and asked me if I would like some supper. I was too excited by the strangeness of my adventure, and the long ride in the sun and the dust of the harvest day, to be hungry; but I said yes, and she showed me into the kitchen, and asked if a plate of cold pork would suit me. She was a kindly soul, and called me Sonny.

What would I like to drink, she inquired, standing by the table. I asked for cider. The house had only cider on tap, she said. That's what I like, I'll have a pint, I said, remembering the cask in the cellar at home, which I used to drink when my father was not about. Sitting alone at the table, while from the next room, which was the bar, a sort of roar of talk and laughter came to me with the smell of rank tobacco, I ate my pork and sipped my cider. I was more hungry than I had thought, and ate with relish. After a while I found the room was going round, and I could not eat any more of the pork. The smell of the smoke and the noise had made me giddy, perhaps I had sunstroke and didn't know it, I thought, and went outside to the passage, and groped my way upstairs to the bedroom. There I had an awful sensation that I was going to be sick, and

lay down on the bed, but it didn't get worse and I must have gone to sleep to the shouted harvest talk below in the bar, for when I awoke the moon was very white beyond the window and all was quiet. I was still in my clothes, and undressing, I got between the sheets and woke to the sun shining on the wall-paper. I got up, and after a wash and breakfast, asked for the bill. I don't want any paying, Sonny, said the woman, I'll be pleased to do it for nothing. Oh, but I must pay you, please, I cried, and thereupon worked out a sum for her approval. The cider twopence, the pork fourpence, the room a shilling and breakfast ninepence, would that do? Yes, anything you like, dear, she replied, and counting out two sixpences, a shilling, and three pennies from my purse, I thanked her and rode away on my Swift.

Twenty-four years ago! The journey from Scole (which they pronounced School) to Norwich must have taken me at least two hours; but this time I did it in twenty-two minutes, averaging about fifty-five miles an hour. The road was open and nearly straight all the way, and this was not hogging it. I stopped for tea at Norwich, which I thought a pleasant country town, in a modestly quiet sort of way, and then set out in twilight for Cromer and Dick's cottage in the fishing village beyond.

Whither I arrived, and found a warm fire in a brick hearth, towards which it was good to stretch my cold feet. A whisky and soda was put into my hand, and a cigarette, and I lay relaxed in a chair, the glass tilted lazily on the chair-arm. Even so, I found myself regarding this comfort and stimulation as not wholly right. Why did I need whisky, which I seldom drank? And the inner faint objection to relaxation, why was this? Was it right to be so comfortable, when most people on the earth existed in circumstances which were a disgrace to anyone with imagination? There were so few people to plead for them, to work for them, for a fuller life, which only could be realized when the economic fabric was the concern of all. A remote but insistent voice within me was always crying that there was work to be done, that most of my talent had been buried in indolence and selfishness; while outside was the rain and the cold and the battlefields of the world awaiting every generation

until by a struggle and triumph of the creative will, the New World should be born.

Soon the whisky was thickening warmly within me, and I was content to lie there, idly talking. I told Dick that I felt I had outgrown Devon, I was not living any more myself, I was entirely without hope of writing any book about the West Country. During the past two or three years this feeling had been petrifying within me. Also the family was growing up. There would be a big change in England, a revolutionary change. Half the European countries were in process of altering their entire conception of economic and physical life, an evolutionary process which was not properly understood in complacent, mature England. Maturity was a kind of death, and preceded decay. Always in history wars had come out of this condition. Decadence and resurgence, one followed the other: a natural law.

Likewise, in family or personal life, the same law held. Families rose up through the virility or drive of one man; they maintained themselves, and continued in power; or they ceased to work, and disappeared. I had an old Devon book of the mid-eighteenth century, with names of landowning families, what were now called county families; six out of eight of them had disappeared in less than two hundred years. The names did not even exist among the labourers! Some great families remained, holding their estates, but only because each generation maintained itself by work, otherwise called service. Since the rise of industrialism in England, the power had been going from the landlords, and was now in industrial interests. Banks and insurance companies had mortgages on land; they foreclosed and became landowners; the next phase was selling the land, and investing the money abroad, as this made a better return. Meanwhile, for a long period, the fertility of English land had been slowly diminishing, until to-day it produced about half of what it produced even at the beginning of the twentieth century, when for fifty years or more it had been declining.

White bread, what was white bread? It had first been made when the peasants had flocked to the towns and factories, to get better wages in the new prosperity which came when England started to sell its factory products to the rest of the world

The white bread came about because the yellow-grey whole-wheat berry was said by the town-people—sons and daughters of the uprooted peasants—to be dirty. So millers began to adulterate the flour, to make it clean or white. Some bleached it; others added plaster of paris; all kinds of adulterations followed; then came a law against it. Meanwhile cheap corn was coming in from the ploughed-up prairies of America and Canada, from Russia and Central Europe, in exchange for factory goods and machinery sold there. Energetic business men erected mills at the ports, and got machinery to skin the wheat, thus making a nice white flour for nice white bread. The valuable yellow skins were called 'offals', and were fed to pigs and cattle. Little children in towns, poor waifs, had rotten teeth, in consequence.

I was not easy while I was holding forth like this. I had a feeling I was boring, a ranter, an impotent revolutionary. For years I had been talking about such things, as they were of consuming interest to me; but of course I had a crank, as boat-builders said of a sailing ship which kept veering off its course, through ill-balance or misshape, or some unknown cause. Oh well, England's all right, we muddle through somehow, and come out on top in the end, was the usual tolerant summing-up upon such tirades. Sometimes one was guilty of bad form in speaking of such things.

Sixteen million people in Britain permanently undernourished: fifty million starving in the Empire: the intelligences of children subdued in schools, their minds fed on white intellectualism. These and a thousand other conditions apparently were the basis of social good form.

'There's a windmill near us where wheat is ground for flour, and baked in the village bakehouse,' said Dick's wife, adding, 'I wonder if you would like living in Norfolk. It would be a complete change, of course. The air is dry and hard, after the soft relaxing atmosphere of Devon. There are lots of birds here, to watch, geese and shore-waders. Dick, shall we take him to see the Old Castle at Creek, which is empty now, or would it be too large, do you think?'

'I wonder,' said Dick. 'It's been empty a long time, and is for sale. You would be able to buy it very cheaply, a lovely Elizabethan house, with turrets and a ruin. I wonder if he would like

it? There's a river through the grounds, with trout in it. In fact, if it wasn't for having to work in London, and being so inaccessible, I think we would have thought about it for ourselves.'

The word *inaccessible* roused my interest. *Shore-waders, trout-stream. . . .*

'Quite big trout, too,' said Dick, 'two-pounders are common, I believe. It's a chalk stream.'

'Let's take him to-morrow, and look at it, shall we? You'll be able to see the fine coastal view, over the marshes, and perhaps see the wild geese.'

'There's a ghost, I believe, but that will probably add to the attraction.'

Chapter Three

I EXPLORE AN HISTORIC HOUSE



It was a dull morning, and after breakfast we set out, to explore the old house, which was about a dozen miles westward along the coast. The seashore lay east and west. While I lay back in comfort on the leather seat of Dick's car, he told me over his shoulder that during the Great War Zeppelins used to make their landfall at dusk along the coast, waiting there until dark, when they moved inland to their raids. Often they were low, two or three thousand feet only above the Point, which now was a bird sanctuary where in summer thousands of terns nested.

Out of the right-hand window, as we drove on, I saw the sea beyond low cliffs of sand. I remembered those cliffs. Only a few days after I had arrived in 1912, it had started to rain hard, and after breakfast I had gone to find a moorhen's nest in a pond near the village. I had meant to wade in, and take the eggs, and eat them for breakfast with fried bacon; but when I got to the pond, it was already brimming over its edge, and the surface was lashed with striking drops. On my return, the village street was running with water, and I amused myself standing in the middle of the road, watching the fast flow breaking half-way up my bare legs. Soon it was up to my knees, and I went home to the cottage, which was dark owing to the black sky. By midday it was a torrent, and after lunch, when we paddled towards the beach, I saw the gap in the cliffs, through which was a footpath to the beach, torn wide and crumbling. Great masses of brownish clay were falling into the torrent from above, and boats were washed out to sea. It was a terrific rain, about six inches falling in a few hours, and half Norfolk was

flooded, including Norwich, the sewers and drains of which were choked and burst open. When I cycled back to London a few weeks later, the roads were still torn and cut about by the scours, and in many places I had to wheel my bicycle, owing to the roughness and the heaps of strewn stones lying about.

I did not tell Dick about this memory, I thought it in mental pictures to myself, because I did not want to be tedious. I knew I was garrulous, and often tried to check the flow of words which usually came to a ready tongue. At this period in my life I was disciplining myself, trying to slow down my nature, to take life more easily.

The country was changing, woodlands and sloping fields, and soon we came to vast level tracts of marshes stretching to the sea. They were grey, and somewhat dull. Dick said it would make all the difference if the sun came out: the air of Norfolk was the keenest and clearest in England, and the marshes were famous for the sea-lavender and other maritime plants in summer. The road rose and fell, and passed through villages with cottages built of large pebbles or half-flints and old bricks, and Roman tiles. Some were Dutch in design, and Flemish; also the Huguenots had settled here, leaving their pattern of farmhouse and cottage on the countryside. It was the least changed part of Old England, with only a few visitors in summer. This was attractive to me, after the Devon coast, which had changed so rapidly since I had known it, becoming built upon, and populous.

I was keen to see the house which could be bought for a thousand pounds or so.

Dick pulled up under some trees, at a bend of the road near a church. It seemed a remote, even desolate, spot. A man was walking behind a solitary cow up the narrow street. I buttoned my raincoat to my neck, and got out. 'I wonder where we can get the key,' said Dick.

The white-painted letters on the notice-board beyond the flint garden wall were faded, the black bordering of it was green with mildew. We walked down a gravel drive, and came to the house. It had an immemorial beauty of faded brick and flint, with pinnacles and round towers, and a tiled roof uneven with great age. But immediately I was disappointed, because

obviously it was far too large. While we were walking down to look at it from near the river, an old man with a stoop and a fringe of whiskers all round a sad face appeared. He stopped, and quizzed us. I felt I was obtruding, but I said, 'Do you know where we can get the key? This house is for sale, isn't it?'

He did not reply at once, but looked away. At length in a quavery voice he said, 'Mr. Stubberfield at Whelk writes out orders to view.'

He was a subdued-looking, grey little old man. He seemed disinclined to talk further, so we left him, and wandered about the deserted garden, and went down to the river across swampy ground. The river was muddy, moving along sluggishly.

The house looked to be half-decayed, and gloomy. The key-stone of one of the arches of an outbuilding was carved with the shape of a pig, the crest of the Bacon family, which had built the place. Here it was, apparently, that Francis had written his books. Also a modern author had lived in the house fairly recently. So it wasn't so remote a part of Old England as I had hoped.

'What do you think of it?'

'I'd like to look inside. Wouldn't you?'

'I've been inside, but I'd like to see it again.'

'Shall we get an order to view? The local agent is at Whelk, only four miles away. Let's go, shall we?'

Whelk, or Whelk-next-the-Sea to give it its full name, had a narrow main street leading down to a view of marches and the sea. A modern grain elevator arose above an old quay whereon railway trucks were standing. A fisherman in blue slop and rubber thigh boots passed, under his arm a wicker skep filled with shell-fish. Two sailing ships were moored alongside the quay. It had an old-time air, which was pleasing to me.

Returning up the narrow street, with its small shops almost touching one another, we sought and found the offices of Mr. Stubberfield. A clerk sitting beside a fire in an early Victorian grate went up bare wooden stairs, and coming down again, asked us up. In the room above Mr. Stubberfield rose from a table covered with papers, to receive us. He was dressed in breeches and leggings, and had a pleasing country voice, and[

had the feeling that the place was much as it had been when Jefferies was writing *Hodge and his Masters*. Yes, the Old Castle had been for sale for some time now, with two hundred and forty-two acres of land. There had been many inquiries about it, but the owner, Commander Trelawney, who lived in Cornwall, would not sell the house apart from the land; and no-one wanted the land, unfortunately, said Mr. Stubberfield.

We got the order to view, and left the car again among the trees by the church. The old man was not about, so we opened the front door and walked in.

The place was dark, the air cold and musty. Immediately I knew I could not live there. A sombre greyness was in every room. And the kitchen! It looked like the boiler-room of an abandoned and worn-out steamship. How many tons of coke a week had been burned in that crude central heating apparatus? Probably the pipes were choked with the hard chalky water.

It felt to me to be an unhappy house. We went downstairs to a cellar under what might have been the billiard room, striking matches. The floor was dry-rotten, with yellowish-white patches of fungus creeping everywhere over the wood. We hurried up the stone steps again, into the damp grey room, and up a spiral staircase to the first floor. The bedrooms were better, but the floorboards, the walls, the ceilings, all had a feeling of exhaustion, of fatigue unto death. Perhaps if the sun had been shining, this feeling would have lessened in me; but I could not bear the place as it was. People do leave something of themselves or their sufferings and joys in a house, and these are often, if not always, caused by circumstances which surround them; therefore a badly placed or built house would cause more unhappiness than happiness. I wanted sunlight, air, and soundness about me; not darkness and decadence. The rafters seemed almost entirely rotten, and were hung with bats. I wanted to get out into air.

Dick seemed a bit disappointed about my reaction to the house. 'It is rather a grey day, of course,' he said. It was raining again. The old man was coming slowly along a path through the long withered grasses where stood a few straggling trees. He ignored us, and went his bent-back way to the outbuildings. We walked to the car, and drove home.

The next day the sun was shining. I had an impulse to see the Old Castle again, although it was quite impossible as a place to live in. 'They might take a thousand for it, you never know with these old places,' said Dick. 'And quite honestly, I don't think it is so bad as you think. The roof will probably stand another two or three centuries. We did look over it fairly carefully, a year or two ago.' Well, anyway, there was no harm in looking at it again. An hour later we were once more walking up the stairs of the estate agent's office in Whelk-next-the-Sea.

At the brief interview with Mr. Stubberfield, I said something which eventually altered the course of my life. I told a lie, or rather I inferred a lie. I knew I did not want to buy the house, and I felt somewhat mean in asking again for an order to view it; so to excuse myself to myself, I said, 'I suppose the owner wouldn't sell the land apart from the house, would he?'

Mr. Stubberfield's face showed surprise. 'Well,' he said, 'that certainly is an original suggestion. Everyone so far has complained that it is the land which prevents them buying the house! I'll write off to-night to Commander Trelawney's solicitors, and make inquiries, if you like. But I ought to be truthful with you: the land is in a bad condition. It's been treated more as a game preserve than a farm.'

'Who's the tenant—do I know him?' asked Dick's wife.

'Mr. Sidney Strawless.'

I felt myself to be mean, the poor fellow writing a letter, when I had not the least intention of buying the land. With another order to view, we returned, and sought out the old man with the tired eyes and thistledown whiskers. I gave him two shillings, but his eyes remained as before. Again we walked up the spiral staircase, again we went from bedroom to bedroom down the passage and up to the rafters and down once more into the cellars. Again it was a relief to be in the open air. We walked down to the river, and crossed a small brick bridge to the farm beyond.

Black thistles and the frost-wreckage of nettles lay everywhere on the grass, rotten sticks and branches lay under the trees, the lane or road leading to the buildings was all water, and the yard we looked into seemed nearly three feet deep in mud. Flint walls were broken down, every gate was decayed or fallen

to pieces. Tiles were off, showing rotten woodwork patched with dry-rot. The place seemed entirely forsaken.

We walked on poor grassland up a hill. Near the top, we saw the coast we had come along from Whelk, and the red roofs of cottages in the village. Walking to the crest of the hill, we came to pine-trees and a superb view through them of water meadows and distant arable beyond to the white lines of breakers on a shallow coast.

'What a place for a house!' said Dick's wife, 'and look, there's a lane leading out to the road beyond, it could be made up for a drive.' As she spoke, the sun came from behind a cloud, and colour flowed into the landscape. The boles of the crooked pines glowed brown, and their dark heads became green. Even the faded grass had life.

We went down the hill again, and walked through the neglected grounds of the Old Castle. The notice-board had an interest for me now I had seen a bit of the place. It was an excellent sporting property, it declared, two hundred and forty-two acres, with trout stream, duck decoy, and well-placed coverts. The woods had looked nice from the road. What a place for the children! They could wander about, fish in the stream, and we could live on the game. Norfolk was the home of the wild pheasant. *Supposing I became a farmer!*

The thought startled me. My boyhood picture of myself as farmer returned to me. Windles, my eldest son, playing with lead horses and trees and hurdles, had said he wanted to be a farmer. Of course the thing was impossible, I knew nothing about farming. Quite impossible.

Supposing I became a farmer. . . . Dick drove slowly home-wards in the twilight, while from the back seat I stared at the watery meadows dissolving into the winter's night.

We had tea at an hotel on the quay of a village a couple of miles away. This was a fashionable place in the short season, I inferred from what Dick said. In summer 14-foot sailing dinghies made of polished cedar-wood raced in the creeks. Few trippers came there. It was so different from Devon.

Tea was served by a waiter wearing tail coat and white tie. The only other visitor in the room was a man reading *The Shooting Times*. In the middle of tea the waiter bowed to him,

'You are wanted on the telephone, sir, by Mr. Sidney Strawless.'

The name made me alert. Dick had heard, too. After a while, the man returned, smiling. Dick's wife rang for more hot water. The waiter came into the room again. When he had brought the water, the visitor asked for a whisky-and-soda, saying to him, 'I'm told it's the finest small shoot in Norfolk, which of course means England. Very high birds.'

'Yes, sir, it's as good a shoot as Mr. Strawless is a shot.'

Dick and I exchanged glances. Even as we were sitting there, a letter was on its way to London, asking if the owner of the finest small shoot in England would sell it, although buying was, of course, not my intention. We felt we were spectators of a mild comedy called *In Darkest Norfolk*; especially when the door opened a few minutes later and a tall man with black hair, wearing tweeds, strode into the room, and the visitor rising said, 'Mr. Sidney Strawless, I presume?'

'Good evening, sir,' replied the newcomer, quietly, as he sat down. I tried to listen to what they were saying, though I felt I ought not to be trying to listen. Apparently the visitor was to shoot on the morrow. I heard words, *duck, snipe, woodcock lots of 'em, we usually get a hundred to a hundred and fifty birds about this time*. With the intuition that makes a man aware of being listened to, the newcomer, after a glance round at our table, lowered his voice.

When we had finished tea, I packed a pipe, then sought for matches. The visitor, seeing me patting my pockets, offered me a box.

'Thanks very much. Are the geese in yet?' I asked him.

'Yes,' replied the farmer. 'But they've gone away again.'

'Looks a fine sporting country.'

He looked at me keenly.

Returning his look I said, 'Isn't that your farm, opposite the Old Castle at Creek?'

After a pause he said, 'It is. Why?'

'Oh, we've been looking over it to-day. I wonder why such a farm wasn't sold long ago?'

He got on his feet and said almost violently, 'I'll tell you why! Because they're looking for a mug!'

'Isn't it a good farm, then? It looked rather pleasant to me.'

He snorted. 'You can't do anything with that hilly land! Are you a farmer, then?'

'Oh, no, I know nothing about farming.'

I felt almost like a conspirator with Dick, as we drove home to his mill cottage above the fishing village. We discussed it over and over again that night, as we played our two evening games of draughts, and I went to bed feeling that on the morrow I must go back to Creek and really look at the farm properly. Of course, I said, I wasn't really serious; yet the farm was in a beautiful position, with its hills and woods and meadows.

Chapter Four

I AM DRIVEN BY AN IDEA



I returned along the coast road the next morning, alone, in the Silver Eagle. It was a clear day, and as the road moulded itself under me, with rise and fall and turn, I felt the exhilaration of the keen Arctic air. Now there was width and depth in the sky and on the earth and sea, and I knew why so many artists had come to paint along this coast, with its clear lights and distances. It was a land of far-extending marsh and watery dykes, wind-mills, grey North Sea, and teams of horses drawing ploughs. How different from Devon, with its small hilly fields and great stone-banked hedges, rushing streams and soft moist air! I felt like an explorer as I passed through the slow and gentle East Anglian villages.

At length I came to the road I was beginning to remember. The farm lay on the left, beyond the river, which here made a horseshoe curve, with rushy meadows immediately below. When I stopped to climb down the grassy bank and stand beside the river shots began to come flatly across from the distant trees. Looking towards the woods, I saw several figures in the meadow, firing at birds which were flying over. The firing was rapid and I saw many pheasants fall. About fifty or sixty reports came in less than two minutes.

I went on, and stopping my car by the Old Castle, saw half a dozen big saloon cars standing on the drive. I wanted to go and watch the sport, but thought it might be an intrusion, and so I went to Whelk-next-the-Sea to get further particulars of the land.

Mr. Stubberfield was just about to set forth for an auction, he told me, but he was not leaving for a minute or two. I asked him if he had heard anything from the owner, and he replied

that there had hardly been time since my visit of yesterday afternoon. He gave me particulars of the tenancy, saying it was let to Mr. Strawless for £100 a year, including the sporting rights. In the old days the land and sporting rights had let for £284. There was a tithe of just under £80 a year, and also drainage rates about £18, both of which the landlord paid. Also, said Mr. Stubberfield, there was income-tax on the £100, a further £22 10s., making about £120 a year. He ought not of course to tell me these things, as he wanted to sell the property; but later I might want to know such particulars, so he might as well tell me now. Really, a rent of £100 was very low indeed, but the trouble was in the lack of a farmhouse, and Mr. Strawless, who farmed a thousand acres of land next to the Castle Farm, had offered that rent for it, and as it was the only offer, Commander Trelawney had decided it was better than letting the land revert entirely to weeds and rubbish. I had probably noticed the weeds? It was a pity, but many farms were in a like condition. Land was not considered much of an investment nowadays, concluded Mr. Stubberfield.

I dared to ask how much Commander Trelawney might want for the land, while feeling I was being drawn into a trap I had prepared for myself. Perhaps I was the mug they were looking for? Mr. Stubberfield replied that the solicitors were asking seven thousand for the land and house, but he couldn't say how much they might be prepared to consider for the land. As we were going down the stairs, I said, 'I suppose you couldn't give me any idea of the value of the land? Or how much capital it would take to farm it?'

'Somewhat difficult questions to answer offhand, sir. I understand that the property sold for a little over eleven thousand before the War. Colonel Trelawney, the Commander's brother, spent three or four thousand on putting it in order, too.'

Including the monstrous central heating plant, I thought. Seven thousand pounds! I hadn't seven hundred.

'It's good land, you know. It used to grow fourteen coombe of barley in those days.'

'Oh really?' I didn't know what a coombe was, and as for barley, all I knew was that it waved like the sea in June, when the green beard was come on it.

'Have you done much farming in Devon, Mister, er——'

'Williamson.'

'Oh yes, of course.'

'I'm afraid I never remember names myself.'

'Well, Williamson is a well-known Norfolk name. Do you know Norfolk?'

'I used to come here as a boy.'

'It's a pleasant spot, isn't it? Well, I must be going! Have I got your address? I wonder if you would mind leaving it in the office downstairs? I've got to go to Great Wordingham Market, to grade fat cattle. We have some very fine box-fed beasts in some of the farms still, though I'm afraid farmers lose on such beasts nowadays. Good day, sir, I'll write to you as soon as I hear.'

I gave my name in the office. Coombe, grading cattle, box-fed beasts, what did these terms mean? Great Wordingham Market, Creek, Whelk-next-the-Sea, what simplicity in those names! How different it all was after Devon. I left the tiny office with its bills of Auctions and Sales, and went into the pub near by, with a feeling of helplessness. Anyhow, it wasn't any more strange, really, than the going down to live in Devon after the War, on an unconsidered impulse, or the fact that I was a father of children or the author of several books. Hadn't I bought the field on the Devon hilltop on impulse, and never regretted it? Nevertheless, I felt a damp kind of hollow inside me. I had some beer and bread and cheese.

'How did it go?' asked Dick, on my arrival back in the darkness. I told him what had happened, adding that I had gone to look at the buildings, and talked with a labourer who was feeding some great old sows. I asked how many birds they had shot that day, and he had replied, Several. How many was several, I further inquired. About five score, he said. I asked if it was a good farm, and he said, Who's been telling you otherwise? Then it wasn't ruined? What was wrong with it, he asked back. Look at the mud, I said. Always mud on farms, he retorted. What sort of a farmer was Strawless? A good master, he let them alone. I asked him what a coombe was. A sack. How much was a sack? Half a quarter. Then what was a quarter? Two coombe, he said. Had he worked there many years?

Several. Then he asked me if I was going to buy the farm. What did he advise, I countered. It's been let-go, he said, after glancing round his shoulder, but don't you let them do you. I liked him.

That night, sitting by the fire while the rain beat on the window, I began to imagine my small boys playing in the woods; building a hut and roasting a rabbit over a wood fire, sleeping out in the summer and running wild on our own land. Our own land! What a grand sound that had. It was a fine farm, those woodlands and the wild pheasants, there was a duck decoy too, Mr. Stubberfield had told me. The woods often were full of woodcock in the early winter. I hadn't shot for years, fifteen years since 1922, but my mind had no objection to shooting for the pot. My vegetarian phase was over, and with it the mental misery I had been going through during that post-war phase of humanitarianism.

But heavens, what was I doing, thinking of the farm in terms of fantastic fairy-story! Was I prepared to milk a cow every morning at five o'clock? To feed a pig and go to market and haggle, as I had seen Devon farmers, for hours over half a crown? While they drank more and more cider? Did I seriously think I could enjoy such a mode of life? Wasn't I unpunctual, unreliable, careless about money? Also, how was I going to buy the farm? If I had saved five or six years before, when my books had sold well, then I might now, at forty, be able to think of such an investment.

'It would be nice to have Henry as a neighbour in summer, when we are up here, wouldn't it?' said Dick's wife.

'When he's writing that book about the wild goose,' said Dick. 'Also, I think a book about farming would have a good sale.'

Was this the way out? Would an active life rid me of the periods in which life seemed but vain endurance, for some purpose I saw dimly in the future as an inner call or urge to be of use to a new England? Since writing my book about the ex-soldier I had been generally unhappy; and had put down these prolonged moods to an inactive life. To learn to write, I had gone into the wilderness, and lived as a solitary; now that phase was past, leaving a vacancy in my life. I longed, as Lawrence

had longed when he had joined the Royal Air Force, to change myself, to become normal, to be simply content with life as it was lived around me. Now if I became a farmer, wouldn't I grow the root in the ground that poor T.E. had failed to grow for himself? In the glow of such thoughts I saw myself walking behind horses, singing as I ploughed, and then going home, changing and washing, eating a hearty meal, after which I wrote five hundred words—the maximum laid down for himself by Arnold Bennett, who had seemed to me to be naturally a happy man, with a full life—and then relaxed as a cat or dog before the fire.

There was farming blood in me. My mother's family had been farmers; some of them had farmed the same land under the dukedom of Bedford for more than four centuries. My father's family had been landowners until comparatively recently, in the Midlands and the North of England. Surely I would be able to succeed as a farmer?

Two days later, in the Barbarian Club, I spoke to a Wiltshire farmer who had made a reputation as a writer and broadcaster. It was Dick who had first introduced him to the reading public, by asking him to write a book which fully lived up to its title of *Farmer's Glory*, which surely would be read as long as the sun shone on English corn.

I asked him, Did he think it a good time to buy land? 'Land has never been so cheap for a hundred and fifty years,' he replied. Also he said, 'It's very difficult to farm and write at the same time. My farming has suffered since I became a writer. I can't give it the time it should have. Farming is a whole-time job. Also writing is a whole-time job. They clash.'

Then I asked, How much capital was needed for a 200-acre farm. It depended entirely on the district, and what sort of farming one went in for, he replied; but £10 an acre was usually reckoned to be the absolute minimum.

After midnight supper of beer and kippers in the Club—I'd seen a grand film, Hollywood-Broadway song-and-dance beautiful-girl show—I composed a night-telegram to Devon, asking for my mail to be redirected to the Barbarian Club. When the score or so of letters came, two of them immediately affected me. One was from my mother, written from a Black-

heath nursing home, telling me she was not very well, but not to worry, but if I had time, would I go and see her; the other was from the agent at Whelk-next-the-Sea, saying that Messrs. So and So, the Solicitors, had been instructed by Commander Trelawney that he would be prepared to consider an offer for the land. If I would make one, Mr. Stubberfield would communicate it immediately to Messrs. So and So.

That afternoon, I went to see my mother. I had not seen her for several months, and immediately observed the change in her; and I knew, with feelings I tried to hide, that I would have to fortify myself, to help her through her agony. In childhood and boyhood my mother had meant much to me; perhaps the link between us, as in the case of D. H. Lawrence and his mother, had been stronger than is normal. On my return home after serving with the infantry in 1914, as a volunteer two years under military age, I had found it impossible to resume the old relationship of affection; we lived in different worlds; and now, although I was supposed to be grown up, and was a parent myself, all the old anguish came over me, and I found myself talking wildly about the war, and another war which would arise if the same mentality ruled in England. I had spoken like that during the battles of 1914-18, to the distress of both my parents, who had believed in the righteousness of the war, or at least in the wickedness of one nation and the virtue of the other. Struggling with myself to divert this overstrong flow of feeling, I told her about my visit to Norfolk, and how I liked the country, and was thinking about going to live there. With memories of the vast Atlantic sunsets over the western ocean, my mother said, 'Oh, but the sun is in the wrong place. It sets over the land!' My mother always loved the sun, she responded to it as a butterfly in spring, and her memories of her children playing by the edge of an unilluminated sea were upon her, for she was thinking of her grandchildren on that same beach, lapped by the North Sea so coldly different from the warm and glowing Atlantic of the West. I saw that she dreaded the darkness.

'No-one can make farming pay nowadays, dear. Marjorie's husband lost most of his capital in two years, it is very bad, she tells me. They are going to give up the farm, after all those years.'

'Mother, I am not like the others. I must do something with my life; writing is not living. Anyhow I achieved what I set out to do, and would like to work with my body.'

'I am afraid farming is finished in England, dear. It is all industry now. We cannot put back the clock, however hard we try,' she sighed, and I saw she was in pain.

I put my hand on her brow, thinking how small it was, and childlike, with the thin faded hairs, and the dark suffering eyes. Was this dread thing that was killing her due to white bread, to wrong values, to industrialism, to unnatural ideas which had come upon European man? My mother was always over-anxious, afraid. Hush, my child, hush, do not say such things, how many times in the past had she said that, to her wayward child, who so often protested against so much that was done and said by her. As I stroked her forehead, I thought of the old saying, Only the truth can make ye whole. I wished she could die soon, to cease in sleep, and find the peace her sensitive spirit so seldom found in life.

When my mother died, I knew I should have some money left in trust by my grandfather. It would probably be enough to buy the farm. I shrank from asking her for particulars of this trust. Even so, the thought had occurred to me, so what was the difference, except as a matter of sensibility? I knew how she lived in her grandchildren; I longed to say, Mother dear, do not be afraid, the children will be so happy and fearless, strong and confident to make the New World out of the wreckage of the Old, in which you, a tiny unit, are perishing; and I, too, perhaps, in my time. Mother, the salmon dies after spawning, and the floods of spring wash its dislusted body to the great sea again, to dissolution and return to the fount of life, even as the eggs are hatching in the pure gravel beds of its racial origin. And so your children, through me your son, will live the happier because they are natural on their native land. But how could these thoughts be uttered? I muttered that she would soon be well, yes she said with a smile, do not worry, dear, I shall soon be well and happy again. So I went away, feeling small and useless because the truth was not between us, even at this last.

The journey to Devon was long and cold, and I was exhausted when I arrived, and not happy to be home again. Perhaps

if I had had a strong whisky and soda before the fire, I would not have remained depressed and disappointed at my home-coming; but drinking spirits to maintain one's equanimity seemed a weak and decadent thing to do. After boiled eggs and toast, and some tea, however, I felt more confident, and told Loetitia about the farm and the house. 'The farm sounds nice, dear,' she said, 'and if you think you could buy it, there's the money I had when Papa died.'

'It's a lovely farm, we'd have all our own wood and game, we could grow our own wheat for bread, the children would love it, they could have ponies, and honestly I think land will very soon be the only sound investment. The economic structure which brings in cheap and frozen food, to the detriment of the soil and people of Britain, can't last for ever. Everyone who thinks knows about it, but no-one seems to know what to do about it. I suppose I'm as indifferent to money as most writers—so long as I'm not really short of cash!—and investments as such bore me; but we've got five children, and should look to the future. What do you think?'

'I think you're right, dear,' said Loetitia, as she knitted a woollen jacket for the baby in the cradle asleep beside the hearth.

'But do you really?'

'It sounds a lovely farm. But do you think you would work it? Don't think me critical, dear, but you do get impatient sometimes, don't you? There, I didn't mean to be critical. You're like Windles, he gets impatient, and easily upset.'

'In the nursery, yes, with toys. I've seen him. But if he worked his body, he'd slow down, and grow like a tree in a proper soil.'

I lit my pipe, and lay back, my slippered feet to the blaze of the beech sticks. I saw myself with a gun under my arm, returning slowly, contentedly, with a brace of pheasants in a bag slung over my shoulder. I had a fat red face, and my eyes saw life easily. My books were popular. I wrote them without any revisions, and the style was full of a lazy or tired man's *clichés*. I recalled my first sentence consciously written for a book, in 1918. Chapter One began: *The weather was beyond reproach, and the sun shone in a cloudless sky*. In those words, as I sat in an

asbestos hut at Étaples, waiting to join a draft going up to the battle which eventually broke the Siegfried Line before Cambrai, I had felt again the hot summer day in Devon, the still sunlight on the dust of the sunken lane, the butterflies, the grasshoppers rising in the hedges, yellowhammers singing on the single telegraph wire, and from high ground the Atlantic was azure, absolutely smooth and still. The curious thing was that most readers got a better picture from such a worn phrase as *the weather was beyond reproach* than from a studied and meticulous building-up of colour, form, and sensuous impression. Why rack oneself to death as Conrad did, writing prose that only a very few appreciated? Why write prose at all? It was unnatural, to sit hour after hour, day after day, week after week, getting more and more dyspeptic, while projecting life and vitality into an imaginary world. Much easier to be normal and natural; to go with the tide; to be uncaring about the slow decline and decadence of the human life about one.

Yes, it was better to be ordinary and natural. I saw myself with the gun under my arm, and the brace of pheasants in my bag, pausing to admire the still clear light of the East Anglian evening. Behind me, the stubble of a good harvest, and the stacks beginning to be sharply outlined against the western sky. It would be a change to see the modest little sunsets of the east after the great ocean-flaring sky-colours of the west. Poor neglected East Anglian farms, big flint and brick barns ruinous, farm labourers on the dole, nobody caring about the cornlands of Britain. Absentee landlords, nobody like the historic Coke of Norfolk (of whom I had heard from Dick) altering the face of England, so that the faces of country people were happier. There was no-one pleading for them; no-one prepared to ruin himself for a cause in which he believed: the well-being of the people of the land of Britain. What a book I would write of my experiences! I wasn't really egotistical, I wanted to see a change, an alteration, a revolution of people's minds, so that wholewheat bread should be made and sold again to the people; to hell with 'big business' that put dividends before the health of the people.

I wanted to *do* something. Words were not enough. What had Lawrence written of his *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, and then, in another mood, taken out of the final version?

This, therefore, is a faded dream of the time when I went down into the dust and noise of the Eastern market-places, and with my brain and muscles, with sweat and constant thinking, made others see my vision coming true. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake in the day to find that all was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dream with open eyes, and make it possible. This I did. I meant to make a new nation, to restore to the world a lost influence, to give twenty millions of Semites the foundation on which to build an inspired dream-palace of their national thoughts. So high an aim called out the inherent nobility of their minds and made them play a dangerous part in events: but when we won it was charged against me that the British petrol royalties in Mesopotamia were become dubious, and French colonial policy ruined in the Levant.

I am afraid that I hope so. We pay for these things too much in honour and innocent lives . . . we were casting them by thousands into the fire, to the worst of deaths . . . that the corn and rice and oil of Mesopotamia might be ours.

'Loetitia, shall we buy the farm? I think I shall have just enough to work it, when Mother . . . do you think me callous to mention it?'

'No, dear. I am sure she would understand. She only wants you to be happy.'

'I feel I could succeed! I can always write, and earn any capital we would need.'

Loetitia paused in her knitting. 'You've worked very hard, you know. Do you think it would be too much of a strain, all the business details, I mean?'

'Perhaps you are right. If only I had someone who could act on my ideas. I know! How about Sam?'

'Sam?' she looked surprised. I waited for her to say something, impatiently. She knitted slowly.

'Well?'

She frowned to herself; bit her lip. At length, with a mild desperation, she said, 'I'm not against your idea. You always think I am against your impulses, don't you? Actually I am considering what you say. Do you think Sam would be the right person? He's so different from you.'

'He was. But that's twelve years ago. Since then, he's been in Africa, and made good. He commands men, doesn't he? Any-

one who went out there without a penny, and worked his way up, must be all right. How about sending him an air-mail letter? You like him, don't you? You and he get on well. Then in time I could leave the farm to you and him, and perhaps travel, and be free to write. It's a fine idea, isn't it?

Loetitia, I felt, was always disappointingly slow. She seldom shared my enthusiasms. I knew that she thought slower than I did, was less impulsive; as I knew that she would never get into, or cause, trouble. The objective artist in me saw her qualities of patience, tolerance, and simple endurance: had I not limned her in the character of Mary Ogilvie in *The Pathway*? But the personal or superficial self was too often impatient, and violently critical, of her calm, which I then saw as slowness, even sloth, and her lack of immediate response to ideas, as lack of imagination.

Sam, her brother, had been like her in this; tenderly sympathetic, always ready to work for others, entirely without thought of personal gain, even to the point of loss to himself. It was their family nature to be gentle, completely without interference in the lives of others, indeed they had seemed unknowing of the striving world around them. As children they had lived in the remote Devon countryside, with few friends, happy and self-contained as a family. Their mother had died when they were children, and an old father had lived with them, shut away from life since the death of his young wife. He was the rare type of man who loves but once, and then for ever.

Loetitia frowned. 'I don't know,' she replied, slowly, while the colour mounted in her cheeks. 'Don't think me unsympathetic,' she went on hurriedly, 'but I am wondering if you and Sam could work together. You are such utterly different types. I know we vex you with our slowness, and I don't want you to be vexed.'

It was only occasionally Loetitia and I talked together like this. I felt a flow between us when she spoke her mind. Usually she was afraid of venturing any opinion, lest it be the cause of upset between us. The idea became happy in my mind, as I outlined a rosy future wherein Sam would be managing the farm, and saying to me, as he met me by the pig-house, wearing breeches and leggings, while I dismounted from my horse and

gave the reins to one of the men, 'I've just made out the balance sheet, old boy. We've made nearly three hundred last year, not bad as you say, but next year we'll double it.' I heard my reply, as with calm eyes and sunburnt cheeks I struck my riding boot with a short and knobbly Malacca cane. 'That's fine. I must go away soon—they've asked me to write a couple of films in Hollywood, and there's that land adjoining us in the market—we could do with another couple of hundred acres, don't you think? Land's never been so cheap for the last hundred and fifty years, you know.' 'Well, old boy, you provide the land, we'll work it and get the coombes, and the cattle for grading out of the boxes.' As he spoke, the children galloped up on ponies, and Loetitia in an old-fashioned sun-hat of straw (our own straw, woven on the premises) waved from the distance, as she went up the hill to paint another water-colour. She had never painted one in her life so far; but on the farm she would have leisure, after the drudgery and unhappiness of our early years.

Chapter Five

I AM FILLED WITH DOUBTS



Loetitia's doubt was due to experience of my behaviour and attitude towards her family. To give the causes of this doubt, I must go back in time a few years.

In telling the story of the farm, I realized that it would be necessary to tell also part of the story of the farmer. I set out to tell the truth, while realizing that my feelings about people and things were only one aspect of that truth. Personal truth pursued too far is often egotistical, tedious, and eventually unreadable. For to many men, Truth is their own grievance, a sublimation of their repressions, a justification of their defects. Robert Burns asked for power to see ourselves as others see us, which is clarity: most men struggling for justice wish for power to come upon others, so that they themselves may be seen truly, without misjudgement or dispraisal; and that is charity. 'If all men had clarity, there would be no need for charity.'

It is the job of the artist, creating character, to shine upon his men and women as the sun shines on them, with clarity, benevolence, seeing no shadow. Let me see how the artist's memory can re-create the past of one man's life.

In the days when I was living alone in Devon and the writing of books was my only aim and thought, Loetitia and her father and brothers were the nicest people I knew. In their house was a freedom and ease which I had never thought to exist in the world. There was the old father, gardening in a tweed suit carefully kept and used since the nineteenth century, a grey otter-hunting pot-hat on his head to keep the sun off his eyes. There were three brothers, shy but friendly, listening, but seldom replying, or indeed knowing what to say in reply, to the

theories and ideas about the causes of the World War poured out by myself, an unknown stranger with a racing motor-bicycle, who had come into their house, to stay, apparently, as a friend of their sister's. They accepted him as one of themselves, without reservation or question.

I slept in the hammock under the elm-tree in the garden or in the wooden chalet on the lawn, in which their mother had died some years before during the War. The brothers were keen on engineering, and had somehow got a contract for making parts of battery-making machines. These brass parts they turned on a treadle lathe, often working all night to get the job done. The lathe belonged to their father, who had amused himself in his workshop, during intervals of otter-hunting and shooting in pre-War days, before his brewery shares and Russian stock had declined to almost nothing; and then had to be sold to pay for his wife's long illness. When first I knew them they were poor, but happy; knowing little about the money which came from the family solicitors, or why it did not come sometimes.

I used to visit them on my motor-cycle, a sack of rabbits over my shoulder and a spaniel dog sitting astride the petrol tank between my knees. I took my cat too, a small black and white mother-cat called Pie. She used to ride with the rabbits, and although she meowed plaintively the first time, she soon got used to it. What a grand family they were, I thought! What merry evenings we had in the little sitting-room! In the arm-chair sat old Papa (though of course I didn't call him that) reading his threepenny bloods—the thrilling adventures of Sexton Blake the detective and his assistant Tinker—which he bought at the railway station after returning from otter-hunting; Loetitia and I and Sam on the sofa, which was broken in one corner, reading or playing Ludo, while one brother sat in a wicker chair and read and the other moved about until someone got up and left the room, when on return his or her place was likely to be filled. Copies of ancestral portraits by Gainsborough looked down from the walls, on the family eating supper of shrimp-paste sandwiches and coffee made from a shop-bought brown liquid in a bottle. What freedom these innocent people had from that worldliness which spoiled so many grown-up men and women, I thought. Many times I told myself of my

good fortune to be among such simple and sweet people; and as for Loetitia, she was beautiful as Desdemona, she was a Shakespearean heroine in the flesh. O fortunate author! to have found among the post-War bitterness, disillusion, and hatred, a family whose modesty and simple kindness was entirely natural.

My periodic arrivals with the sack were invariably greeted with a 'By Jove, that looks good!' from Sam, the least inexpressive one of the family; though roars of laughter would come from Papa as the small cat, dishevelled and bewildered, was shaken out of the sack with the rabbits. While the Boys were working at the treadle lathe in Papa's workshop, I skinned the rabbits and dissected them for the pot, helping Loetitia in the kitchen, afterwards scrubbing out her larder, the haunt of another cat with kittens, and swabbing the scullery floor and scouring the sink. We washed up together, and I tried to get some sort of method into the place. Loetitia cooked for the four men, made the beds and cleaned the rooms, and also did all the washing of clothes. Her happy disposition and equal mind prevented her from feelings of unhappiness or frustration that most of her work seemed to come continually to naught: always there were piles of washing and mending, including Papa's white breeches and hunting stocks. The Boys did not keep their bedrooms tidy, everything was scattered about; though Papa was always methodical, everything in its special place both in his bedroom and his library, where daily he entered up the data of rainfall, temperature, and wind direction in his meteorological charts.

I used to bring rabbits over because when first I knew them, they had no food in the house. They lived on potatoes, or bread and cheese. Their cat used to sit up at the table with them, and also a tame robin flew in the window and perched on Papa's head, to the old gentleman's annoyance. So the Boys made a neat wire-netting frame to fit over the open window, behind which the robin used to flutter, stittering with rage, and pecking to come in among his friends.

Their cat liked currants, and every mealtime would put a paw delicately, nervously, over the somewhat grimy edge of the tablecloth, where cuffs greasy from lathe-work had pressed, and try to hook in with her claws a small round hole in the

cloth—which looked like a currant. It was one of her tricks to take currants with a curved paw, and eat them on the edge of the table with her head on one side. Every mealtime the hole in the tablecloth used to provide amusement for all the family: maybe that was one of the reasons why the tablecloth remained there week after week.

When Papa died, the Boys, as Loetitia called them, would have some money from the trustfund of their parents' marriage settlement. One of them had an idea, How about trying to get some of that money now? Only a little part of it, of course, about one hundred pounds. It was fatiguing work, pushing on the treadle-lathe hour after hour. Now with a hundred pounds they could buy an oil-engine, and two more lathes, and turn out more work. Keen on the idea, they went to see a lawyer.

Certainly, said the lawyer, he would make inquiries on their behalf. The inquiries were so thorough that in less than a week he gave them the good news that much more than a hundred could be arranged, if they liked. Why not sell all of their reversions? Then they would have nearly three thousand pounds, with which they could enlarge their engineering shops more profitably. They thought him an awfully nice fellow to have taken such trouble for them, and agreed it would be fine to have a big Works in their garden, right by the house, so convenient for business. So they signed the document; and a few months later, when Loetitia left to share the precarious life of an unknown and unconventional author, building began. They gave the job to a small local builder, to help them. There was no contract, no price agreed between them. When the building was finished, the little builder hired a cab, bought a barrel of beer, and drove round the town visiting his friends. For a whole week the little man celebrated: the dream of his life had come true: suddenly he had a lot of money.

As for the Boys, inexperience and trust in human nature had resulted in a factory being erected with walls of only a single brick in thickness. Part of those walls fell down, and had to be rebuilt. Only the roof held them together. This had cost about £1,600, but when the fire insurance inspector came to look over the completed building, he said that in the event of a total

loss his company would indemnify them only to the full value of the building, which was £600.

Workmen had been engaged, machinery ordered. The blacksmith's son, a lad of fourteen years, was given a job as an apprentice and most generously paid twenty shillings a week. Elsewhere the parents of apprentices had to pay for their sons' learning to be mechanics, and the money they paid was returned as weekly wages. But Sam had been an apprentice, for a brief while, to the local ironmonger, and had sympathy for their hard lot.

The Boys also had sympathy for commercial travellers who went from place to place, often without getting a single order. Also the things they had to sell were all likely to be useful to the Cobbold Brothers. Sparking plugs for instance, now that motoring was on the increase; and such neat sets and layouts of various kinds of plugs, from two-stroke engines to racing aeroplane plugs with cooling vanes. So Sam bought one gross of mixed sparking plugs, and put them with the neat pyramids of puncture outfits, car-cleaning brushes and sponges, electric light bulbs, and other gadgets he had already bought. The new shelves and show-case looked fine: and they waited for customers.

Occasionally a labourer, on an old push-bike, called in to have a puncture mended.

Seeing an advertisement in the local paper for the construction of an iron roof on the gasworks beside the river, they applied for the job, estimated that it would cost them £100, and put in their tender. To their jubilation, they got the contract. Now they'd show what Cobbold Brothers were made of! Joe the blacksmith helped to make some of the ironwork in their new forge. The brothers worked from early morning to late at night; it was summer; they sang and whistled at their jobs. They wanted to get the contract finished in time for the Joint Week of the Culmstock and Two Rivers Otter Hunts. I too was looking forward to that week of walking, having lunch and tea by wayside inns, and careless rides home afterwards in the summer evenings.

During one lunch-hour rest, someone strolled out from the gasworks and said that surely the sheet-iron louvres for the

main ventilator in the roof were too thin? Wouldn't they rust in the salt sea wind? the someone demanded. Adding that cast iron would be much better. When they returned home that evening, the Boys consulted the blue prints, and specification, and found that cast iron was not stipulated, nor for that matter was sheet-iron; but it was their first contract, and must be absolutely first-class work. They agreed that if the gasworks people wanted a ventilator with cast-iron louvres, well, they supposed they ought to have it. So it was ordered from a Bristol foundry, who charged sixty pounds for it, including the shapen wooden mould. It weighed twelve hundredweight, and when the gasworks manager saw it, he declared that the roof was not strong enough to support it. The junior clerk who had made the suggestion of cast iron did not remember the conversation during the luncheon interval; and when the roof was finally on, the Boys found they had lost about £100, in addition to their time as workmen.

Meanwhile they found they could not work outside all day, and also attend to the business side. So the books were not methodically kept. No-one was responsible for attending to the post; they did it between them. Replies to letters were intermittent. The man who originally had asked them to make parts for battery-making machines wrote frenzied letters about the chronic lateness of the dispatch of orders. All three partners drew cheques from the banking account, whether for personal needs, housekeeping, or business matters. There was no limit to the withdrawals, and no check on them, until one day the bank manager wrote and said they were overdrawn and what security was there for further overdraft. This was unpleasant; and to escape the unpleasantness, they all went otter-hunting. An old friend of the family continued to come over to the Works on his motor-cycle, and to borrow sums of money from the Boys. Generously and sympathetically, his requests were always met.

The time came when half a dozen or more summonses for unpaid accounts were lying about in what was called the Office, among letters and bills scattered with catalogues and cigarette ends and the parts of models (for engineering was still a keen interest in their lives). Since they did not know what to do

about the summonses, they did nothing. For weeks the Works had not been working, but they hadn't the heart to stand the men off. They were still on full pay, including the expensive apprentice. When Loetitia and I went to stay with them in August, the position was that all the money had gone, and four to five hundred pounds in debts were about to be collected by means of summonses, judgement summonses, and writs.

I had looked forward to fishing for flatfish and bass in the estuary by the railway bridge, all the summer weeks; but something had to be done to help the Boys. I knew nothing about business, and had an aversion to materialism, figures, mathematics; but something had to be done. It was hard to find where to begin. The place was untidy and unorganized, and the books had not been kept latterly. Sam was the only one who concerned himself with book-keeping. For the last year of his education at the local grammar school he had played truant, leaving home every morning on his bicycle with lunch-bag and satchel of books strapped on the cross bar. For three terms his father had thought him to be at school, while the headmaster assumed he had left. Sam, however, was not lazy; he educated himself by reading engineering and electrical books. He dreamed of having the letters A.M.I.E.E. after his name.

Sam's knowledge of book-keeping was small, and based upon courses of instruction by post. After working hours he had sat at a desk, in the room adjoining the cosy sitting-room, and tried to master the principles of double-entry book-keeping. Through the closed door, in those happy evenings before my marriage, we used to hear groans, with mild explodents like 'Dash!' and 'Curse it!' Eventually Sam gave up the courses, exchanging into Electrical Engineering.

Sam was a nice boy. I longed to help him. He was always willing and ready to help me, to be my companion, to adjust my motor-cycle engine, to listen to my short stories as I wrote them, to go for walks and expeditions with me. One day we had gone to Cranmere Pool on Dartmoor together, walking all day up the Taw valley through heather and peat-moss, soaking wet in grey rain. For hours we plodded upwards, to look at the

place, for a description of the Two Rivers' source in *Tarka*. Sam was happy helping anybody in any sort of work, a decent little brother-in-law.

I set myself to give them all the help I could. How many summonses and threats were there? No-one exactly knew. Some of the dashed things had been thrown away, or burnt. The writ was important. I had £30 in the bank, and drew this out. I went round to people who owed them money, and tried to collect it, telling the truth. This gave us a week, while costs of stays of execution mounted up. The old family friend who came on his motor-cycle to see the Boys, and get some money from them, was met by myself as Manager of Cobbold Brothers. After an interview, in which I said firmly, No more money! he managed to borrow £5 from me. I totted up the sums in the cheque-book counterfoils, and found he had borrowed £150 from the Boys. I got a Promissory Note from the Post Office, and saw that he signed it, for presentation to his trustees after his death. More judgement summonses arrived, with threats of bailiffs. A knock-down sale would be disastrous. All that fine new machinery, sold outright, by order of the Court, without advertising! I travelled hundreds of miles on my bicycle, with the eldest brother, visiting relatives. Would no-one lend £150 on a bill of sale? No-one would. They were sorry, but it was not their affair.

Meanwhile costs of a judgement summons for a vacuum cleaner bought for £13 had mounted to £35. Two pounds had to be found, or the bailiffs were coming in.

I made inquiries about the thing. Why had they bought it? It appeared that one day in May, a traveller had called, and promised Sam a lot of easy money if only he would drive him, the representative of the best vacuum clearer in the world, to visit Sam's friends in the neighbourhood. So Sam drove him around. At the first house, he was reproachfully refused admission by the elderly butler. At the next house, they were Not At Home. At the third house, no-one answered the bell. The fourth house was occupied by the General, a decent chap, declared Sam, who went otter-hunting.

The General told them his wife was away, and in any case they did not want a vacuum cleaner. Sam, who was sensitive

about the intrusion, was about to retire, when the demonstrator asked to be allowed to clean the General's carpets for nothing, with absolutely no obligation. Again the General said he did not require such a cleaner; again the demonstrator persisted, and at last was running the machine over the carpets brought back from India. Driving away with the machine, the demonstrator told Sam that he had a sure sale there, and all Sam had to do was to buy a new cleaner from him for £13 and sell it to the General for £17, making £4 for himself. Sam thought this a good thing, but before he gave the order, obtained from the salesman a written statement that he would take back the machine if it was not bought by the General.

In due course the big cardboard box was delivered by the railway van, and taken over in the car to the General's. Mrs. General said firmly at the door, 'We did not order it, and we do not want it; and I consider your bringing it over like this a most questionable procedure.' Sam stammered an apology, and said of course he would take it away at once, and returned with the unopened box, which was put away with other unsold stuff in an attic.

Eventually the judgement summons, and costs of keeping the bailiffs out, had increased the original debt of £13 to £35, and if £2 were not forthcoming on the morrow, the bailiffs would enter.

Without saying a word, Sam went to Exeter in his car, and returned in the afternoon with £2.

'How did you get it, Sam?'

Sam replied modestly, 'Oh, I had an idea. I pawned the beastly thing.'

'What, the vacuum cleaner, for two pounds!'

Sam nodded.

All that morning I had been trying to make some sort of order in the Works, sweeping the machine room, making piles of catalogues, bills, accounts, etc., and also cleaning the new lavatory which the workmen (now dismissed) had left in an unbearable condition. I had cleaned the bathroom in the house, too, for no-one but myself seemed to be affected by the marks of ancient washing; and having worked throughout the lunch hour, in a desperate fury at the complacency around me, I felt

an immense frustration of rage, intensified by complete loneliness; for there seemed no point of contact anywhere in my way of thinking and theirs. Here was Sam, holding out two pound notes, his usual diffidence mingled with a certain air of Pride, for had he not saved the situation by pawning the vacuum cleaner?

I couldn't bear it any longer. I do not remember what I said, or shouted, at them; but they looked startled and bewildered. In the days that followed (having sent Sam back to Exeter with £2 to get the cleaner, which was not legally their property, I told them) I was in despair, and exhausted by haranguing them continually, trying to get them to see life from a different viewpoint; to use self-criticism to destroy their old selves, and rebuild a new conception of life. They didn't know what I meant, and perhaps I was foolish to think that they could do for themselves what I had done (I believed) for myself: rejected all the past that had blossomed, or rather had come to a pox, in the Great War. This was the theme of the book I was writing about an ex-soldier, and it arose from my own life.

Of course I lacked experience, even as they did; an emotional urging was useless to them, and harmful to me. The situation, which was desperate, was most curiously solved the very next morning; when the eldest boy calmly announced to me that he had been left £3,000 a few months before, by the death of an aunt: adding that he could not get it, as the solicitors had not sent the cheque yet.

For over a month I had been rushing about, trying to borrow money to prevent them being made bankrupt: for over a month the judgement summonses had been mounting up in almost geometrical progression; and all the while the money was available among themselves. I felt quite light-headed.

Half an hour later, having lodged proof of this inheritance, an overdraft was arranged at the bank, and there was general rejoicing at the end of the crisis. I went fishing alone in the estuary, grieving at the change that my behaviour had caused in the happiness of that household. I had done nothing to alter things; I was foolish to have interfered; and now there was a rift, perhaps for ever.

The two younger boys emigrated to South Africa, working their passages as stewards on an emigrants' ship. The eldest

brother remained, buying a new car and enjoying himself by learning to fly an aeroplane. About a year after the two brothers had departed, and the Works were standing idle, the General came in to buy a vacuum cleaner. He would like to help in a small way, he said, by giving an order for one. Ernest said there was a second-hand one somewhere in the store-room, but of course it was an old model, although it had not been used except for one demonstration. This was the cleaner which had cost £37, and heaven knows what waste of nervous life; and Ernest sold it to the General for thirty shillings.

That was years ago, before Loetitia's Papa died and the mortgagors foreclosed and Ernest joined his brothers, and being a good mechanic, soon got a good job. It was years ago, but I did not seem able to forget it. This night, for example, as I lay in bed, past scenes moved brokenly in my mind, and with them feelings of fear, hope, exaltation, and happiness; that Sam and I would be friends again; then doubt once more, and the vivid past recreating itself from the cells of my brain which had been impressed in 1925 made me writhe in torment for my failure. How they had hated my interference, for it had been interference. Why had I interfered? I hadn't known where to begin, everything had been wrong, muddled, all contrary to the law of economics and creative life. In vain I tried to convince myself that it had been but a fragment of an England in decline, the inevitable end of inherited wealth in a family unprepared for life; so that it was foolish, or at least illogical, to expect spiritual awareness of music, poetry, art, and literature in such a condition.

Now if Sam, whom Loetitia loved dearly, came home again, to the England he loved dearly—his letters were full of longing to see England again—and we all worked together, after two or three years the farm would be in order and I could hand it and the care of the family over to them and be free to move about and so to rid myself of the material responsibilities which for years had been slowly stifling me as an artist. I wasn't equipped to deal with such things. An artist needed periods of freedom and irresponsibility in the true sense of the word in order to prepare himself for the next leap, or act of creation. Every hour of

actual writing should be preceded by at least six hours of mental freedom, of relaxation, while the subconscious mind was working.

I wanted to write more books; they had been waiting within the hidden mind for many years now. A year of hard physical work on the farm, with Sam as eventual business manager, and I should be strong and well again; and I should be able to write without any subjective feeling, for all the past would be cleared up. Sam would see me with different eyes, he would know the cause of exasperated feeling in the old days, and all would be well between us. The ghost of that sad time would be laid, to stalk no more in memory which is part of human life.

I lay awake happily, until my thoughts went along another tract of remembrance, and ended in my mother lying in the nursing home, and soon I was back again in scenes of the Great War, which had arisen inevitably out of the repressions of European man. So much work to be done, to alter the entire way of thinking in England! Someone must do it, otherwise another war was inevitable, with the same old slogans of vice versus virtue, brutality against humanity, right against might: while in the crater zones and on the frigid seas ignorant poor men died in agony.

I was used to such night torments since early childhood; the period usually went on two or three hours, before peace came and I could sleep. About this time I discovered that a glass of hot milk, taken at night, kept the ghosts of memory from rising in the midnight dark. Especially was the thermos flask by my bedside welcome in the weeks following the death of my mother.

Chapter Six

I BECOME MORE INVOLVED



Meanwhile air-mail letters had been crossing the sea to the emigrant Sam, labouring on the veldt of Africa. Also letters were going from Mr. Stubberfield in Whelk-next-the-Sea to Messrs. So and So in Bedford Square, thence down to Cornwall, returning to London and so on to Norfolk and finding me in Devon. Commander Trelawney would not consider an offer of £1,500 for the farm. Another series of letters: Commander Trelawney would not consider an offer of £2,000 for the farm. Our Devon cottage, a place of hope and anticipation, became filled with doubt and negation once more. The yellow-covered *Farmers' Weekly* lay on the walnut gate-leg table with other papers; and the blue *Farmer and Stock-breeder*, incorporating *Farm, Field and Fireside* (lovely title!), *The Farmer's Express* and *The Agricultural Gazette*, joined it. I scanned Sales and Farms, and read over to Loetitia accounts of holdings with arable, grass, woodland, and streams. Why not farm in Devon? I wrote to several agents, and soon piles of loose paper joined the farming weeklies. Sussex seemed a fine place, also, why not try what they had for sale there? I went in the Silver Eagle to stay with a friend at Shoreham, and from there prepared to look over several farms. The best, called Four Winds Farm, a most attractive name I thought, with a fine description of oak woods and grassland, wild-duck shooting and a lake where three-pound trout had been caught, and a herd of dairy cattle with a sixty-gallon milk contract that could be taken over at valuation, turned out to be bleak-looking, with modern corrugated-iron buildings, and a suburban villa for a house, while the wild duck were shot long ago, after they had been hatched under a farm-

yard hen, and as for the trout, they too had disappeared, after being put in a dammed-up pond, through which a small trickle moved. How had they got there in the first place? The farmer thought they had come from a trout hatchery. The previous tenant had turned them in. I felt, disconsolately, that the glowing mental picture I had from the description was so dulled by reality. I gave up the idea of farming in Sussex.

On impulse I went to Norfolk, a drab journey through London, after the road to the West Country, wretched as it was for the first fifty miles. I stopped again by the Old Castle, and went to look at the farm premises. I knew now what a coombe of barley was: about two hundredweight. Four pecks made a bushel, four bushel made a coombe. I knew that the rotation in Norfolk was, or used to be, barley, followed by hay, followed by another corn crop, followed by roots for the feeding of cattle or sheep. Straw, hay, straw, roots. Roots, otherwise turnips, had been introduced into England by a Norfolk squire called Townshend, known as Turnip Townshend; and thus English people had fresh beef in the winter months, instead of salt beef. The bullocks were kept in the yards, fed on hay and turnips, and made into fat stock. They trod the straw from the threshed corn-stacks, and made it into manure, which was spread on the fields in turn.

There were no bullocks in the yards of 'my' (tremulously 'my') farm. The mud seemed deeper than before. The man I had talked to, was driving a cow into the mud. The gates were broken, and propped up by odd bits of wood. I hadn't stopped for lunch, as I wanted plenty of time to walk round the farm, and also to see Mr. Stubberfield. Now that I had come, there seemed no purpose in walking round the wet fields, so I hastened away, and called at the office in Whelk, to be told that Mr. Stubberfield was at another town on Thursday, ten miles away. The clerk pointed it out to me on the map, and I went along a twisting road, through a faded-looking town with old brick and flint buildings, with monks walking along the narrow pavement, and a shop with saintly souvenirs, and at length came to the market town, where Mr. Stubberfield was found sitting at a bare table in a bare room in a faded building by the square. Except for the market outside, it might have

been an evacuated French town behind the lines in 1916, and Mr. Stubberfield the town-major just moved into an empty billet.

'Well, sir,' he began briskly, 'Messrs. So and So have now written to say they want three thousand for the farm. As you know, I have submitted your offer of two thousand, and they have replied they will not consider it.'

Thereupon, trusting his country manner and believing him to be simple and honest, I confided in Mr. Stubberfield. I told him my position. I knew, I said, that a minimum of ten pounds an acre was needed to farm a mixed farm, though fifteen was nearer the mark. This would mean at least two thousand pounds. To buy the land, or to farm it, would take all my capital. Then what about a house? I could not build one large enough for a family of seven, and a partner, with an extra room for a secretary and another for a nurse or servant, under fifteen hundred. I liked the farm, but that was my position. What would he advise me to do?

Mr. Stubberfield considered. 'You say you have no farming experience? It is a very bad time to begin farming, even with experience, just now. Indeed, many farmers with experience are wishing they could get out of it before losing all their capital! I can see you are keen, and frankly I would like very much to sell you the land, but as you know, it has been let-down rather badly, and to get it back will cost money.'

'May I ask you one thing, Mr. Stubberfield, though I feel it may be an impermissible question. Do you think the farm is worth two thousand five hundred?'

'Well, I haven't looked over it recently, Mr. Williamson, but I should say, without prejudice of course, that that is probably something in the neighbourhood of its value. Though, mind you, this must not be taken as even a rough estimate on my part! I am only an intermediary, as you know!'

I felt I must appear a weak fool, I was taking up his time, I was far from home, unsure of myself, entirely without confidence. Was I about to create another Works? Of course, I had my writing; I could always earn more capital. The family self-supporting! Going home with a bag of pheasants on my shoulder. I didn't know where the home was, but it was somewhere.

I heard myself saying, with the thought that I was not actually offering this sum, but only asking *if* it would be considered: 'Do you think Commander Trelawney would consider two thousand five hundred for the land?'

'I'll certainly ask him,' replied Mr. Stubberfield, briskly. 'I'll write straightaway. There's just time to catch the London post. Your address in Devon will find you, sir? Good day, and though I hope we meet again, if we don't, then the very best of luck to you.'

I went down the bare stairs and out into the market square. A man was selling bunches of grapes by holding them up and shouting raucously. There were heaps of clothes laid out on the asphalt, piles of tools, head-ropes, pig-nets, horse-collars, chains, and boots. Most of the people were small, and simple-looking. To be simple, that is uncomplicated, was to me a virtue. I wanted to be simple like them. There was a sense of permanence about the old town, with its bank built in the florid style of mid-Victorianism, the policeman on traffic duty doing his job without the urgency of life in a large town. Here everybody knew about their neighbours, this was in the midst of the great barley-growing district of England. I talked to a man with a stall selling cockles on small white plates, a penny the plateful. They were Crikky Blues, he told me. Where had I heard that? Oh yes, in the book I had bought from a second-hand shop in the Charing Cross Road, written in the leisurely days before the War. As I munched the cockles, not quite knowing if I liked them or not, a four-wheeled harvest wagon drawn by a pair of horses went past. 'Barley for the mill,' said the cockleman, 'they still send it by horse up here.' I had a second plate of cockles. He refused payment for it. 'Pay when you've finished,' he said. I noticed that a man beside me, eating quickly and pulling a bit of white bread in his hand, had seven little plates piled before him. An old Dutch or German custom, perhaps, brought over by the many immigrants to this country? I had a third plateful, threw down the coppers on the wooden table as the other man had, and went into the Crown, and had some beer. Sitting by the fire and eating a beef-sandwich, I began to feel a glow inside me. This was my home, I thought, I was always a stranger in Devon, but here I am among my own sort of people. Was I foolish to have raised the offer by five hundred pounds?

A rich author, perhaps they thought me? Anyway, I hadn't actually offered this sum, I had merely asked if it would be considered. Either it would be considered, or it would not, Anyway, I dare not go any further.

When my feet were warmed by the fire, I went out, got into my car, with relief that no-one had asked me for a parking fee, and began the drive home. Where should I stay the night? I had a friend about twenty miles away, a connection of Loetitia's, but did I know him well enough to call in and see him? He had asked me to let him know whenever I was his way. I would say I was remaining but half an hour when I arrived, and then go on. He was a landed proprietor in Scotland, and perhaps would give me advice about buying the farm.

The way lay south-west, into the wind, which was blowing across England, from the white crash of waves rolling in from the Atlantic. Windles and John playing on the nursery table with their toy farmyard, wondering what Dad—which was, strangely, me—was doing about the Norfolk farm. We had talked of little else for weeks, and Windles was already wondering if we would have a tractor, or horses. And here I was, filled with fear one moment and hope the next, and almost completely bewildered by the whole idea, about to spend most of Loetitia's money on a part of England as far east from Devon as one could possibly travel.

It was wild heathland through which I was rushing, with plantations of small fir-trees extending wide and undulating to the low horizons. The road was straight, and with the surface it had probably had since the end of the War. The sunset was plain and simple, like the character of the people, almost one-dimensional, as linnet, hare, thorn, or partridge. The northern blond invaders' blood tamed by the climate and immingled with the Saxon or Celt, the little Celts who were always defeated but made the best-humoured slaves. In Devon the Celtic blood dominated the strains of blue-eyed Nordic and hard-dark Norman; in East Anglia, the Nordic strain was clearest. And musing thus, I came to Breckford, and decided to ring up my friend at his house before calling upon him. I went into the Bell Inn, and asked for tea. While it was coming, I started to write an article for a Sunday paper, which I remembered must be

sent off by that evening's post, if it was to be printed in time. I had seen the skeleton of a pheasant by a straw-stack on the farm, on one of the farther fields, and I was puzzled about the nicked breast-bone, the wing-bones which had been picked clean, and all the flesh gone from the skeleton, the frame of which was intact. Could a peregrine falcon have eaten entirely such a big bird, after knocking it down? I had seen the skeletons of pigeons on Devon headlands, of jackdaws and oystercatchers and razorbills, too, after the falcon had done with them; and invariably all that remained were the linked wing-bones, with perhaps a primary flight-quill or two. The pheasant had been treated in the same way, not dragged about by rats or broken up by fox or crow or gull, and I wondered if a big falcon, a gyrfalcon migrating from northern icefields, had fallen upon the bird and then, standing on it, had plucked and stripped it before perching gorged on one of the pines I had seen in the wood beside the field?

I had got so far with the article, while my tea stood cooling on the table before me, when near-by voices overbore my enforced concentration of mind, and at length with a feeling of exasperation I put down paper and pencil. A man in riding boots and a woman were having tea at another table. Obviously he was arguing from fixed ideas in which he believed passionately. Should I ask them to be quiet? My article must go off. But the obvious reply was, why didn't I write it in another room? Thank heaven I hadn't even so much as frowned their way. I closed the writing pad, and swallowed a cup of luke-warm tea.

'There's bound to be a smash,' the man was saying, as he leant forward intently, his hands clasped together. 'The system has got to such a position now that it must either decline, with the biggest slump in history, and consequent revolution—or it will go to war to preserve itself.'

This made me mildly curious. Recently I had been reading Winston Churchill's autobiography, and had been struck by his statement that for four hundred years the policy of Great Britain had been to prevent the rise of any other great power on the continent of Europe. As every undergraduate knew nowadays, wars were always economic in origin, although by the

time of their breaking-out all sorts of human emotions, genuine and otherwise, had usually arisen, and with the rise of feeling abstract principles of justice, humanity, religion, etc., obscured the basic facts of the money-interests involved; and simple men, often in peace-time the victims of the economic system, lost their lives in defence of that system. But I wanted to avoid such thoughts in future; I had written a half-million-word novel on this theme during the decade after the War. I did not believe that any other war would come about in Europe, and anyway politics was a career of self-interest. I wished the voices would stop. At last he got up and said he ought to be going. Could he give her a lift anywhere?

She replied she was waiting to see a man, to whom she hoped to let one of the Guv'nor's farms.

This was interesting, for she was apparently to do with the letting of farms. A land agent, perhaps? Dare I speak to her? She looked sensible and realistic. 'May I ask you a question?' I called across the lounge, 'if you'll forgive me for having overheard something about a farm just now. I'm on the edge of starting farming in Norfolk, and perhaps you wouldn't mind if I asked your opinion.'

'Go ahead,' she replied, 'although I can answer you at once with one word.'

'That word is "don't", of course.'

'You've got it! Where's the farm?'

'Up on the north coast, two-forty acres, used to grow fourteen coombe of barley.'

'Now I suppose they thresh all day and take half a wagon-load to the barn, leaving two or three tons of dock and carlick seeds on the field, to help next year's crop?'

I laughed. 'You've got it.'

Her decided tones were reassuring. This woman knew her job. She told me she managed eleven thousand acres, most of them mortgaged. The only thing that paid were the pheasants, most of which were shot by a syndicate of millionaires. Farming was gone-in. Five years before, in the pit of the depression, a farm of nearly a square mile, with a goodish Elizabethan house and ten or a dozen cottages, sold for a thousand pounds! Two pounds an acre, including all the buildings! No-one

wanted the land. The tithe was as much as eight bob an acre, though the owner couldn't let it for five bob an acre!

'So you're an author—I've heard of you, of course. But, my dear man, whatever makes you want to start farming? No, you needn't tell me—I know—I'm probably as crazy as you are. The Guv'nor and I worry ourselves to death how to get the money to replace one broken tile, and yet it's my ambition to take some utterly derelict land and make the wilderness blossom. It's the fight we like, isn't it? I've been fighting all my life.'

She was good to talk with, and I liked her forthright manner. The upshot of our talk was that she offered to motor to the farm the next day, and give me her opinion of it. She said she had some work to do in the morning, and would meet me at 4 p.m. by the Old Castle. I asked her to lunch with me, and she left, and I stayed the night with my friend, to whom I telephoned.

After greetings, he said earnestly, 'Don't buy that land, don't go into farming, it's the worst possible time, and dear sweet Coetitia, what will she do, it means an awful life for a farmer's wife, and five children, too.' He told me how some of the best land in his part of Scotland was being taken for munition factories, although a mile or two away was poor land, just as suitable. 'The Government is a business government, composed of town minds, banking minds, factory minds, reared on pavements and ignorant of the country and country people, and farmers haven't a chance,' he declared, after we had had dinner, and were sitting by the fireside. 'My dear old Willie,' he went on, 'do you realize that three hundred acres *a day* since the last war—more than eighteen years ago—have been going out of cultivation in this country? We are growing to be one big town. Farming is finished, it's bound to get worse and worse; so for goodness' sake, with all your children to educate, don't ruin yourself by trying to farm!'

In the morning I returned to Creek, having bought some ham and beef sandwiches, and two bottles of beer, in Breckford. For once I was on time for a meeting, and we walked up the hill, past the beds of old nettles and the bedraggled thistles, to the high ground. Almost everything Miss Gunton saw called forth condemnation. The pasture was thin, poisoned by rabbits; a

haystack in one field had not been cut down with a knife, but its top taken off, to save bother; it was mouldy. In the next field the small roots were gnawed nearly level with the ground, every one in every row for quite fifty yards into the field, then every other one was eaten for another fifty yards, then one in four, white and new-looking. The place is infested with rabbits, declared Miss Gunton; look at the hedges, when were they cut last, before the War, I'll say. It's one long warren, that hedge-bottom, why even if this starved land *could* grow corn, you'd lose more than half of it in the plant.

The wind blew cold and raw, so we went down to the meadows, and walked along under the woods where I had seen the shooters knocking over many pheasants. I had not been there before; the way was deep-rutted, water lay everywhere, and as for the adjoining meadow, it was rank and brown with dead weeds. Over it snipe flitted and swerved, uttering their short, scaping cries.

Soon it was raining, and we returned to our cars. 'It's a wretched place,' she said, 'and it will break anyone's heart even to begin to put it in order. How would you get a load of muck up those awful hills? The dour winds, ugh! Cold old land, all of it. Why don't you settle inland, and rent a farm to begin with, a small one, say fifty acres, and see how you like it. You may loathe it, when you've done only one year; and it takes three at least to get into stride. I don't agree with what your friend says, by the way; farming's coming back, and sooner than most people think, though first there's going to be trouble in this country. Well, it's been nice walking over the wilderness with you, now I suppose you'll go straight to Whelk and offer three thousand for the durned place?'

She smiled, we shook hands and I thanked her . . . and found myself going slowly along the road to Whelk.

To my half-relief Mr. Stubberfield was out. The clerk said nothing had come in since the last letter.

My friend had asked me back for the night, and with visions of his hearth and gramophone, I did not put up the hood, but button'd the coat about my neck and in forty minutes was with him again. You stick to your writing, he said, when I had told him the expert's opinion; and somewhat dolefully I agreed it was sound advice.

Chapter Seven

I FIND MYSELF IN THE MUD



THE next night I put the Silver Eagle away in the corrugated-iron garage near the cottage at Shallowford, telling myself that if ever I had land, no such roofing would be permitted. Loetitia was reading to Windles before the fire in the nursery; she smiled; he looked expectantly at me; but my face was blank, because I felt like that. It had been a 260-mile journey, and I was dispirited. No good, I muttered—no farm for us, I was a fool ever to think of it. Never mind, dear, said Loetitia, perhaps it is for the best, anyhow, there's a big post for you, and a lot of things from agents, perhaps there'll be something you like among them.

Sunday on the morrow, and when I came in to lunch after walking up the river bank and back again I saw Windles reading a paper on the floor, beside John. 'Cor, it must have been a tisky old hawk to eat up all of a pheasant,' he said, and 'Cor, I bet it was,' agreed John, who was seven. 'Fine article, Dad,' said Windles. It was a poor article, really: hurried and forced. I ought to have rewritten it. . . . Anyhow, it meant three guineas less ten per cent.

Eight days later a letter came from Mr. Stubberfield, saying that Messrs. So and So would accept three thousand for the land subject to contract. For several days Loetitia and I talked it over, or rather I did the talking, she listened and was sympathetic to all I said—and at last I thought to abandon the idea. But a letter came from Dick that afternoon, saying the salmon book was still selling, and had I heard anything more about the farm? He felt it was a good thing, but hoped I would not blame him if I bought it and then didn't like it. I replied that the price was

too high, that I would indeed be a mug to buy it for £3,000, since I required at least another £3,000 to work it.

For some time now I had been print-sick, or rather book-sick, and had read little, except the papers; but now I found the lists of second-hand booksellers were interesting, in that I turned to farming and country books which were written about East Anglia, and especially Norfolk. I cleared out one of my small shelves, giving the books to a girl who called with a car, collecting for a new university at Exeter. I bought several books, and re-read eagerly all descriptions of the North Norfolk coast. Though some of them were, as is usual with such literature, written with guide books open on the authors' desks, I read and re-read the details of Creeky Blue cockles, wild geese, marshes with sea-lavender lilac in summer, and the general wildness of the coast. The picture I got from them was always brighter and keener than those arising from my own observations. I knew I was seduced by the power of words, but it was a willing seduction. I began to understand how some young people, reading my books, had wanted to meet the author, thinking that some of the effects of the reading would be shining about his personality. I had to resist a strong inclination, several times a day, to telegraph to Whelk with the fatal, trembling words, *Accept three thousand.*

By the afternoon's post came a letter with strange stamps on it, multi-coloured, and in blue the words AIR MAIL. Inside a letter on flimsy paper, in Sam's scrawling fist. He was enthusiastic about the idea of farming, and thought he could manage it, though he would have to learn it; but he was used to outdoor jobs, he declared, and so he was going to switch his course of *Psychology* to the subject of *Farming*. Sam was still apparently studying by correspondence.

About this time there was an exhibition of grass-drying by coke-furnace on a farm north of Dartmoor. I went there, and was surprised to find myself among at least a thousand farmers, who had come there in quite four hundred cars, most of them pretty smart cars, too. This did not look like agricultural depression to me, though of course Devon was mostly grass farming, with a large extra money-spending population in summer.

The idea was to cut the grass young, dry it over the hot blasts from the coke furnaces, then bale it, dry but green. Several cuts a year could be taken, and wet weather was an advantage. The fields must be well manured, with chemicals of phosphate, potash, and ammonia. The plant was sponsored by a big international chemical firm, and it was claimed that the dried grass was equal to the finest feeding, and no cake or concentrates were needed for stock fed on it. While the lecturer was telling us about it, I imagined one on 'my' farm in Norfolk, until he said that the West Country was eminently suited for such a process, as it had, unlike the dry climates of the Eastern Counties, plenty of rain to make successive growths of grass. I began to feel depressed at my ignorance, and when questions were asked, dared to call out, What do you suggest for the Eastern Counties? Several shaggy heads turned to look at me, and I felt uneasy, lest they think me bogus, with no right to be there. 'What about lucerne?' he replied promptly, and I nodded, as though fully appreciating his suggestion; and sat down quickly, lest he ask me what lucerne was, which I didn't know.

It so happened that afterwards I met an acquaintance who was agent to a large estate, and was introduced to his partner, who on being told I was thinking of turning farmer, remarked, 'Going to lose the money you made out of *Tarka*, farming, eh?' which I thought the poorest beginning with which a conversation ended.

Such a remark was typical, however, of those I mentioned my idea to. When on the way to London, early next morning, I called in to see Loetitia's uncle, who was a retired admiral, and told him, he replied instantly, 'Good heavens, whatever for?' I stammered about an imminent financial slump, possibly revolution or war, when farming would be a good life; and perceiving how I felt, the good fellow said he mustn't discourage me, and wished me all success in the venture. 'Good for you,' he patted my shoulder as I left, after a glass of Bass's beer, 'I hope it will help to wake up some of the politicians,' while he probably thought to himself that the strength of Britain lay in her ships and trade, not in the decreasing green of her island.

I drove straight to the owner's solicitors in Bedford Square, telling myself I must on no account make any offer for the land.

I pretended to ask for particulars of tithe and drainage rate, lest I appear too keen to buy. They showed me an Ordnance Survey map of the fields, and I began to feel a temptation to blurt out then and there that I would offer £2,750, thus splitting the difference. To allay this temptation I told them I ought not to think of buying it, I suppose, as I hadn't any capital for farming it when it was mine. 'You have land hunger, I can see,' he said at the end of the talk, 'and I suppose I ought to advise you not to buy it, from what you tell me. But if you want it, I know Commander Trelawney wants three thousand. He would include, however, two cottages with the land, in quite good condition. He might be persuaded—though I can't say this with certainty, it's only my opinion, of course—he might be persuaded to accept a little less. Shall I say you're ready to meet him?'

'I'll let you know,' I replied, and grabbing my hat, hurried round to Dick's office, in the adjoining Russell Square.

Dick was going out to lunch with a young author, and in the few minutes I saw him, he gave me the address of his solicitors, saying they were good fellows.

I rang up and made an appointment at three o'clock. I was going to pay to hear what I knew already; but was prepared to enjoy hearing it on these terms, for at least it would be an original experience to be told in suave legal evasions that I was crazy.

It was the dead-line for my weekly nature article, and I wrote it in an A.B.C. teashop, drinking coffee and eating cheese-and-tomato sandwiches. It was finished at ten minutes of three; I posted it; and went round to keep my appointment.

Messrs. Gaythorne, Warble, Hogge and Hatry had offices in what was known as a very good address, turning off Piccadilly. I was ushered into a room with a thick carpet, to be treated as though I were a Colonial Governor, though it was not so good to hear my rather thin, tired voice uttering the same old words about my ignorance of whether I could, or could not, buy a farm, although I could convert two adjoining cottages into a small farmhouse. Mr. Marjoribanks, who was apparently Gaythorne, Warble, Hogge and Hatry, treated my confidence with the most exquisite courtesy, and soon the stammer was out of

my voice and I found myself describing the best small shoot in England, and telling how twelve-pound sea-trout came up from the sea under the sluices . . . suddenly I saw it was four o'clock, and I had gone into the room at three o'clock, and what was his time worth, ten guineas an hour, surely. At least it had given me a firm line: before I proceeded further, he advised me to get the place valued. Should he arrange this for me? And then if I liked he would try to buy it for me? I hurriedly thanked him and got up, for I had, on Dick's advice, joined the Countryman's Association, subscription a guinea a year, with a quarterly magazine, discounts on goods bought through them, and a diary every Christmas; and in the diary, I had read that the commission for buying a property for £2,400 was £25; and if anyone was entitled to this, surely I was, after all my work.

The next thing was to go round to the Ordnance Survey offices and get a large-scale map of the farm, which I dreamed over while waiting to telephone Miss Gunton. Miss Gunton would know a reliable valuer. I asked for her number; and, about half an hour later, or at the rate of three miles a minute, I got through to her. Yes, she knew a valuer, actually she had been talking to him that very afternoon, and had mentioned the farm: that starved, bleak, miserable old place. He said he had valued it five years before, when Strawless had taken it. Why didn't I go up and meet him? My car ought to do it in three hours, and she would ring up Richard Barkway and make an appointment. I arranged to meet her at the Bell Inn at 8.30 p.m., and getting in the Silver Eagle, I went as fast as I could and got there half an hour late.

Miss Gunton was waiting for me. She said she had been having a row with a chap who came in and demanded an Argentine beef steak for his dinner. He was a travelling manager or inspector of a company which owned cold-storage space in London, and had hundreds and thousands of multiple shops all over England, selling only foreign meat. And the yards of East Anglia derelict, she cried, farmers losing money on fat beasts even with the Government subsidy! What was the subsidy, I asked. Seven and six for first quality homebreds, five bob or second quality. Seven and six for each beast, I asked. No, for

each live hundredweight. How much would that be on a beast? Depended on its weight. I inquired what was the average weight of a beast. Round about ten hundredweight, but it depended entirely on how it was fed, and the breed. Some Irish stores were bad doers, something wrong with their livers, and putting grub into them was putting it down the drain. Literally down the drain, as the more cake you gave them, the more it affected the kidneys, and it all went down the drain. It was a lifetime's work to know what beasts to buy, one could lose a packet on it right away if one bought the wrong kind. And even with the best kind, a farmer was lucky to break even. All he had was the muck.

It was confusing, and dispiriting; I felt my ignorance like mildew on myself. After dinner, however, I felt I could achieve anything, and rang up Richard Barkway, and arranged to meet him on the morrow at 10 a.m. by the church.

It was cold and blowy the next day. It began to rain as I got near the village. By the church I saw a fine black saloon car drawn up, and out of it got a keen-faced man dressed in tweeds, and neat brown shoes. We shook hands. While he changed into rubber knee-boots, and put on a thick mackintosh coat, I waited in the rain, clad in raincoat, grey flannel trousers, and brogue shoes, conscious of my inadequate dress for the weather and the job.

With a roll of large-scale maps, we set off past the Old Castle.

We inspected the big corn barn, the hovel or cart-shed, the turnip house (what was that for?), the bullock yards, the granary, the chaff-house. I wondered what the machinery in the chaff-house did. He pointed out how most of the walls were undermined by rat-runs. The corn barn needed a buttress, the wall was cracked and leaning outwards. Many of the rafters of the cart-shed were rotten, and dripping with water. The roof of the building he called the granary, which had dim wooden steps leading up into a sort of attic hung with rabbit skins, was broken in one place and three or four square yards of the floor were sodden. A great crack ran down one wall.

We went out of the building, past the ragged doors and sagging door-posts, and through the bogs which were the roads by the stables and bullock yards. At least, we crept by them, along

the edge, until I slipped, and my left leg was in grey mud to the knee. I knew then why the Valuer had put on gum-boots when we had met.

There were no drains to the yards or stables or cowhouses, gutters were fallen, the roads were impassable. We walked down the meadows, which now were under water. Two unhappy looking cows stood near the gate, as though wishing to leave the meadows. Snipe zigzagged up before us, as we squelched among clumps of rushes, and across trodden-in dykes or ditches which once had drained the land. The larger dykes, into which these lesser cuts or ditches drained, were full of reeds and rotting vegetation. Wild duck got up, with teal, and once a heron flapped away as we went on. 'Five bob an acre as a snipe-bog,' making a note on the open roll of maps. We walked through a wood, to the clattering of pigeon wings and the rocketing noise of pheasants.

'Plenty of game,' remarked the Valuer, 'it's the only thing good we've seen so far.'

We walked up a hilly field, or rather slithered. It was a yellowy-whitish clay, grown with starved-looking weeds. One I knew—silverweed. I recognized the greyish stubs of cut thistles. Apparently it was a stubble: the thinnest stubble I had seen. Again the roll of Ordnance Survey maps was half-unrolled and pencil-marks put on the elongated area of the field. I noticed older pencil marks there. As though reading my thoughts, he said, 'I was here last in 1932. The land has depreciated considerably since then.'

Four hours later, wet and hungry, I followed him across the swollen river, timorously on a single-plank which acted as bridge, to where his car stood by the roadside. 'Let's sit in while I work things out,' he said, when he had removed his rubber boots, and put on his shiny brown shoes. I sat beside him, too empty and chill to want to smoke. I had felt most inferior during the walk around the farm, realizing my ignorance of much of what he had said, such things as folding sheep on roots, a ewe flock on one side the field, and hoggets on the others, and how a valuer could tell by the corn crop of the following year which side of the field had been fed-off to the ewes, and which to the hoggets. How could I cope with such mysteries? I didn't

even know what hoggets were, and had to ask—a little diffidently, as I'd been asking so many questions, trying to learn all I could. He must have exercised patience with me, I realized later. It seemed simple when he had explained. The ewes, in lamb in winter, were building bone, and so absorbed all of the phosphates from the roots, which were usually turnips or sugar-beet tops; while the hoggets, having formed their bony frames, put back most of the phosphates on to the land, to the benefit of corn sown there when the land they had trodden had been cultivated. The sheep was a walking dung cart.

'Now,' said the Valuer, at last looking up from his calculations, 'I'm afraid you won't find my figures very favourable to your scheme. I'm sorry to say the farm is worth very much less than the sum I mentioned on the telephone last night. Less by about a thousand pounds, at a rough estimate. The fertility of the arable land is low. It has been cashed. To explain this term; a farmer can always get a good crop when the land is in good heart, but if he continues to take crops without putting it back into the land—and it costs something to make muck in the bullock yards, with good cake about £8 a ton, and beef a poor market—the land sooner or later gets exhausted. In other words, its fertility has been turned into cash, which goes into the farmer's pocket.' He paused as a sudden shower blotted out my old open car standing fifty yards away by the roadside. 'Surely you aren't going to drive back to Devon to-night? What is it, three hundred miles?' I told him I had to broadcast in the Children's Hour from Bristol, the next afternoon, and hadn't written my talk yet. 'Well, I mustn't keep you,' he said. 'But you'll have a very hard job here if you do what you say you want to do. Well, to facts. Rent, £100 a year, that's what the present landlord is getting. Out of that comes tithe at £79 a year, drainage rate at about £13, then Schedule A Income Tax . . . H'm. At present he is losing by owning the farm. No wonder he wants to sell it. But he's asking too much. Far too much.' He totted up figures. I heard him murmur, 'Thirty pounds a year to keep these meadows drained. H'm.' He closed his book decisively. 'Now, Mr. Williamson, you've told me what your capital is. Frankly, it is not enough to run the farm properly on, even if you can buy the land at its present low value. I'm saying

nothing about your experience, or lack of experience, in farming.' He looked me straight in the eye. 'If you do buy it, at the figure they are asking, it will be against my advice. It is worth not a penny more than two thousand pounds.' He paused, and refixing me with his keen eye: 'If you like, I will try to buy it for you at this price. My fee for the valuation to-day is five guineas. If I succeed in buying the land, I won't make any further charge. On the other hand, if I fail, you will pay me five guineas for the valuation.' 'Thank you,' I said. 'Very well, I'll see if I can buy it for you.' He gave me a friendly smile. He rolled up the maps; put his notebook in its case; gave me another smile, shook hands. I got out, the black car glided away, to a dim hand-wave seen through the glass window. I was left alone, in the greying twilight of the rain-sodden country.

And standing there, I felt a hopelessness coming upon me. Could I change myself, by changing my landscape? Where could I go, what could I do? I thought of the open hearth at home, the ruddy flames of the oak logs, the black kettle on the lapping crook hanging from the chimney bar, the faces of my children in the lamplight, far away in the thatched cottage in that Devon valley. It always seemed so lovely, it made my heart ache—but only when I was away. Well, I must do something, so I would drive to Bristol through the night, write the children's broadcast in the morning, thus paying for my expenses and the valuation, and then go home.

I unbuttoned the wet tonneau cover, took off damp mackintosh, dragged out heavy leather motoring coat, put it on, and drove slowly away.

Perhaps Sam and I could buy an old lorry, and remake those roads. The Valuer had said the main road to the premises would cost £50. Surely we could do it cheaper ourselves. And how lame my reply to the Valuer had been, when he had asked what sort of farming I intended to do—'Oh, I don't really know.' He had looked at me keenly, and then his eyes had seemed baffled. No wonder. What an idiot he must have thought me, feeble, indecisive, ignorant, I drove on fast into the darkness, into the rain from the south-west, the rain coming from Devon, three hundred miles away.

At an unfamiliar town I stopped at an inn, and after drying my legs before a fire, and eating eggs and toast, washed down by hot tea, I felt happier. Gosh, I would get that farm! East Anglia was an unknown country. It was the country of the great Coke of Norfolk, and 'Turnip' Townshend, another great farmer of the past. My little farm—I thought of it as mine—lay between the lands of those famous men of bygone days. Why shouldn't it be Williamson of Norfolk, one day? With four sons, all stalwart yeomen? I wanted the boys to know every kind of child, to begin at the village school. I would like them, if I could afford it, each to go to three sorts of school, and be the same natural boys at each and all of them. Then when they grew up, they would be natural leaders of men: for I would encourage them to be quick, clear, and without mental confusion.

I was drowsy before the fire, and reluctant to go on that night. The keen Norfolk air, and the fire, made me long to sleep. For once, I would go to bed early. Which I did, awaking fresh and keen to get to Bristol in time. I arrived half an hour before the broadcast, finished writing it half a minute before going on the air, took a gulp of water, sought nervously for the pencil-stub without which I always feared my voice would dry up, and for ten minutes spoke about the joys of farming.

Mr. Barkway wrote to me a fortnight later that he had been unsuccessful in his attempt to buy the farm. 'All the adjoining land once owned by the Townshends, is coming shortly into the market. You will be able to buy some of it at a much cheaper price than that being asked for the Old Castle Farm. If you pay more than £2,000 for it, it will be against my reiterated advice.'

Well, that was that. I sent him five guineas, and said good-bye to the idea. As a farewell gesture to Mr. Stubberfield, I sent the Valuer's report to him with a letter regretting that I had taken up so much of his time, and also the time of Messrs. So and So, and perhaps he would forward my letter of apology to them; and thus, most reluctantly, I would bid him good-bye.

But to my complete surprise a letter came back from him saying that Commander Trelawney would accept £2,250 for the property, including the two adjoining cottages I had looked at with the Valuer. Together they had about half an acre of

garden, and there was our farmhouse! And there was our farm, for I sent a telegram to Mr. Stubberfield, Whelk-next-the-Sea, from Barnstaple, where Loetitia and I went that afternoon, to celebrate at the talkies, with the words firmly printed in block capitals.

AGREE TO PURCHASE OLD CASTLE FARM AND
COTTAGES TWO THOUSAND TWO HUNDRED AND
FIFTY SUBJECT TO CONTRACT HENRY WILLIAMSON

Chapter Eight

I BECOME A LANDOWNER



During the months of spring and summer I told myself that to be successful needed common sense, strict attention to detail, organization, and staying power. I considered that most farmers were old-fashioned, that they muddled things, that they neglected to do little things in time, such as replacing a slipped tile on a barn, leaving a plough out to rust all summer and autumn, allowing the valuable nitrogen and ammonia of their yards to evaporate, or wash down the drains: a hundred similar acts of negligence which, spread over a number of years, made all the difference between profit and loss. I also told Sam this, in most of the letters which were flown to him across the land and sea in British Imperial air liners. I told Sam other things, too: that he should learn forthwith to write in script, for he was going to be the manager of the farm, and that meant keeping the books. Sam's handwriting was almost illegible.

He was also to be Trustee and Executor of my Will, for when I should be dead, the family would be in his care, I told him. He was unmarried, and was likely to remain a bachelor.

Sam replied by typewriter, the type of which needed demudding, I told him. After this there was an interval in which no letters arrived from him.

As I look back, my letters to him at this time were over-anxious; and his replies, as verbose as mine, were charged with an emphasis of desire to prove that my anxiety, based on the mortifications of the past, was unnecessary. They continued to arrive in his half-unreadable scrawl, or in typewriting that was as full of hasty errors as was mine.

Other letters were passing, too. I was now operating through

'my' solicitors, Messrs. Gaythorne, Warble, Hogge and Hatry, otherwise Mr. Mordaunt Marjoribanks.

With great care and precision, and step by step like a man building up an edifice that would last for ever, Mr. Marjoribanks guarded the interests of the Old Castle Farm. At first I thought he was being over-meticulous; but later I realized that he was as unfamiliar with the neighbourhood as I was, and as my faithful attorney, he must leave nothing to chance. Lists of queries in red ink travelled to Messrs. So and So in Bedford Square, and were returned with factual answers in green ink. Were there any rights of way across the land anywhere; Were there any wayleaves for electricity? There was a wayleave to carry electric current across one field, for a rent of 7s. 6d. a year. It was too late to stop the concrete posts and thick black wires across the barley field; anyway, it would bring fresh power and clean light to the old and dark cottages and buildings of the countryside.

A red query about an enclosure of land by the Danish Camping Hill, part of the old-time 'manorial waste'; a green note that it was enclosed by the late widow, tenant-for-life, of the late predecessor in title.

Another about Mr. Strawless apparently having ploughed up a particular field of grassland, with reminder that his tenancy agreement imposed a penalty of £30 an acre for so doing without permission; the reply that this field was arable, and was wrongly described as grass in the schedule of fields.

Queries about any land being zoned for housing estates by the Town Planning Act; none so far as was known.

The easy to-and-fro exchange of these and other questions was stopped by the problem of the well outside the cottage. Commander Trelawney wished to reserve the right for water to be drawn by the tenants of a cottage which might be built in the future on an adjoining vegetable garden by a possible new owner of the Old Castle. To get to the well, people would have to walk in front of Walnut Tree Cottage, as Loetitia and I now called it. It was a fine well, of weathered brick, old oak buckets, chain, under a wooden lych. In imagination I saw myself in some sunlit future regarding it contentedly, surrounded by sunflowers and hollyhocks; slowly and meditatively admiring its old

English atmosphere, while my top-grade cattle thronged the meadows, and my barley (20 coombes to the acre) waved over the fields. Strangers, from a square brick bungalow next door, broke into the picture, to draw, with muttered displeasure at the hard work, bucketfuls of water with which they staggered past the door, giving me a glance of displeasure for being a reactionary, and not building an iron water-tank to get pressure with which to hose down their Morris 8 motor-car. No, I couldn't have that happening. In brown ink on the preliminary Draft Contract I said so; adding that surely it would mean that I would have to guarantee water for that bungalow for all time?

In regard to our point about the onerous nature of the covenant for the maintenance of the well for the benefit of Commander Trelawney, his Solicitors say that it is necessary for the Vendor to reserve a right for any cottage built on the adjoining land on the east of the cottages you are buying to draw water from the well as there is no other means of supply. They say that they cannot agree that it is an onerous obligation to require you to maintain the well and in particular having regard to the fact that it will be required for the supply to your own cottage. I rather expected they would say this.

Paragraph 1 of the Second Schedule (part 5 of the draft) has been altered back to provide for the new cottage having the right to water, and I think you will now have to decide whether to concede this or stand right out, in which case you may run the risk of losing the purchase.

Bungalow or no bungalow, I wanted Walnut Tree Cottage, and so agreed to the water being drawn, by a route to be decided by me. A fortnight later the draft contract came for my signature, to be signed across a 6d. stamp, and returned with my cheque for £225. A week afterwards Mr. Marjoribanks wrote that the Contracts had been exchanged, and he was proceeding forthwith to Investigate the Title.

It sounded very grand and important, to have the Title Investigated. I imagined a half-blind, dry-as-dust old man, with quill pen stuck in his ear, peering at old musty tomes and documents, in some dark cellar-like room, searching for a 'clue' here, a 'thread' of evidence there. Would he go as far back as Doomsday Book? For four weeks the Investigation went on, then Mr. Marjoribanks wrote that there were two difficulties.

The first was caused by the Deeds having been lost by the agent of the great landowner before the Trelawneys bought the property. The great landowner had been a ward in lunacy, and a vast industrial insurance company had held a mortgage on his estate. Affidavits were sworn by an old man, the steward of the estate, defining the extent and boundaries of the land; also Trustees of the Ward in Lunacy had a squatter's title by adverse possession—which meant that, having occupied the land for twenty years without being turned out of it, the land was theirs. When the Insurance Company had foreclosed the mortgage, the estate was sold, subject to the absence of the Deeds, and Colonel Trelawney had bought a part of it—the Old Castle and the farm.

The second difficulty was apparently due to the fact that although Commander Trelawney owned the land it did not belong to him with full legal rights. His eldest brother, the Colonel, had made a will leaving the property, mortgaged to himself through his Trustees, on trust for sale by those Trustees, and the income from the sale was to go to his widow. After her death, the income was to go to his younger brother, the Major; after the Major's death, to the Major's widow. The Colonel died, and soon afterwards his widow followed him; then the Major died, and being a childless widower, left it to the youngest brother, who was Commander Trelawney. But before Commander Trelawney could sell his own property, the law must be satisfied that it belonged officially to him. Messrs. So and So, to assure this, proposed to invest the property in him; and the necessary legal document was being prepared.

At last it looked as though the farm might soon be mine; but no, the heron-eye on the marsh-banks of Piccadilly was not satisfied.

I feel, however, that this is not the correct way to deal with the property. I consider the legal estate still to be outstanding in the Trustees of Colonel Trelawney. These Trustees were the Widow and Major Trelawney, both deceased, and therefore the estate is vested in the Executors of the last surviving Trustee who is Commander Trelawney, and his Solicitors, since the property has never been conveyed by the Trustees of Colonel Trelawney to Major Trelawney, or from Major Trelawney to his executors. The point is

rather a difficult one, and I consider it desirable that this view should be confirmed by Conveyancing Counsel. I, therefore, have had a conference with one of the Conveyancing Counsel, who confirms my view, which is now accepted by Commander Trelawney's Solicitors.

One of the Conveyancing Counsel! I had a vision of several gentlemen in wigs and gowns, tapping horn spectacles on old faded parchments, and sipping crusty old port, while the Clerk with quill pen bowed to them and rubbed his hands together, as they argued whether or not in law the owner of the property owned it.

At last Messrs. Gaythorne, Warble, Hogge, and Hatry were satisfied that Commander Trelawney was the owner of the farm. I felt we were getting somewhere, at last; but, wrote Mr. Marjoribanks, the point about the mortgage still remained unsettled, and he had written about it again that day. He thought that when the point had been disposed of, the title would be in order, and instead of taking the Conveyance from Commander Trelawney as absolute owner, the Conveyance would be by Mr. So and So and the Commander as Personal Representatives of the last surviving trustee of the Colonel.

Meanwhile I should be ready, went on Mr. Marjoribanks, to send the balance of the purchase money by the 9th; and at the time of sending it, he would be obliged if I would inform him if a Mortgage in my wife's name should be prepared, the amount of the loan and rate of the interest. Oh dear, more ivy was being planted in readiness for the acorn which I was about to put in the ground! In addition, there would be the Stamp Duty of £22 10s. on the Conveyance and the costs of the purchase.

I hoped it would soon be finished; but a week later another letter came, in beautiful script writing (the kind I imagined Sam using for the books of the Old Castle Farm), saying that Mr. Marjoribanks was in Scotland, for the Twelfth, and the writer was afraid that owing to the difficulties in the title it would not be possible to complete by the 11th. He suggested, however, that I sent the money. Which was done, the largest cheque I had ever signed, for £2,047 10s.

Loetitia and I and the children were in the hut in the hilltop field, camping out and having a free time in the sunshine, when

the Conveyance and Mortgage arrived, in a large envelope sealed and crossed with blue lines. I called all the children to the hut to witness the opening of the envelope. These, I said, are our title to the Farm! See this thick greasy parchment, the flowing hand of the scribe, the curious legal phraseology of death and dissolution and soulless property, the root of all evil. Robert, please don't pick off the red seal, it's not a cherry. No, it isn't a story. Yes it be, cried Robert, I know it be about li'l old Cold Pudding. It isn't, said Windles, it's our Farm! Please may I go down to the village, and swing on Miss Johnson's swings, asked John. And me? said Margaret. I want to go too, shouted Robert. I think the children had better go; Margaret, see Robbie keeps to the side of the road when motor-cars come, won't you? Now, dear, let's look at them, aren't they lovely, said Loetitia, when we were alone, with Windles. Outside a young man hovered—the usual staggart who was writing a book and had come to see the author of the books he hoped one day to surpass—and he was called in to witness the signature. Commander Trelawney's and Mr. So and So's were already on the thin pencilled line. There, it was done.

I was the owner of Old Castle Farm!

PART TWO: ANTICIPATION

Chapter Nine

I ENJOY MY DOMAIN



In a generous, or gentlemanly, or silly, moment I had suggested to the Vendor a period of nine months' grace from the date of purchase in which he would be able to find another place for the gardener. We had got from Commander Trelawney, however, a written undertaking, what was usually called a Gentleman's Agreement, to move the 'service tenant' by Midsummer 1937. Then in the three months between Midsummer and Michaelmas, the cottage would be empty, and in that time I would put it in order for the family, which would be migrating at the end of September.

Apparently the aged fellow I had seen by the Old Castle, when I had looked over it with Dick, had lived there for a quarter of a century. He had £2 weekly, as caretaker and gardener, and also drew the Old Age Pensions for himself and his wife. Being a service tenant, Mr. Marjoribanks had told me, he was in the position of a servant occupying a room in a house when his service has ended. Mr. Marjoribanks expressed doubts of the wisdom of granting nine months' grace, for a nominal rent of ten shillings; but there, I had given the Commander nine months to place his old servant comfortably elsewhere.

Michaelmas 1937 seemed far away; fourteen months before we would start to farm our own land. I read again the letter which I had received from Mr. Marjoribanks that morning.

With regard to the arrears, if any, of Strawless's rent, you cannot rely on the fact that there are arrears to enable you to give him Notice to Quit without becoming liable for compensation for disturbance.

Under the Act you will have to serve a Notice demanding the rent and then wait for a reasonable time before you can give the Notice to Quit.

We think, however, that it is too late for you to serve a Notice which will give sufficient time to be relied on as a means of avoiding the payment of compensation.

It is, however, possible, if, as we understand, the Farm is in a very bad way, the Notice to Quit might be based on the failure to cultivate the land in accordance with the rules of good husbandry.

Whether this is in fact so or not is, however, a question on which your Agent will be able to advise you.

This question is, of course, quite independent from any claim you may have for dilapidations under the Lease.

I return herewith the account in connection with the purchase of Old Castle Farm, which we have receipted for the balance of £61 4s. 7d. due to us, and am much obliged to you for settling the same.

I hope that the purchase will turn out to be a satisfactory one from every point of view.

Anyhow, I said to Loetitia, we don't owe anybody any money now, and from now on things will be straightforward. Shall we take the little camping tent, and Windles, and cross England in the Silver Eagle, and stay a week among the pine-trees on OUR farm? We'll go easily, no rush and strain this time. How about it?

It sounds lovely, dear, said Loetitia.

So one Sunday morning we left in the Silver Eagle, Loetitia beside me and Windles in the back wearing my goggles and helmet, the tent, provision basket, water jug and kettle beside him, with a small bundle of firewood. By the afternoon we had gone up and round and down and up again the hills of Devon and Somerset, through the grey walls and green fields of Dorset and so to the great arable plains under the downs of Wiltshire; and beyond Swindon we stopped, turning off our way along the Marlborough road, to rest and swim in Jefferies' lake at Coate Farm. It was a hot day, and with the sun on our bodies

after the swim, it was good to be alive. I thought of Jefferies' *Hodge and his Masters*, which I had promised to edit and rearrange for Methuen to publish, and how in the new age such books would have a proper and full appreciation. But first the golden tapeworm must be expelled from the body politic. The town business mind, soft and crafty, must be superseded by the hard and simple principles of productive work. The golden tapeworm had reached the brain of the body politic. Modern literature accepted the international money-based values of life as natural, or eternal. Most modern literary criticism was urban, rootless, cosmopolitan in feeling, in keeping with modern square and rectangular architecture, cocktails, jazz, celluloid sex, and factory-made furniture of imported kiln-dried wood, no heart or sap in it. While the cosmopolitan money-tapeworm sapped the national virility, men like Hardy and Jefferies would never be popular.

In a happy, hopeful mood we went on our journey, calling to see a distant cousin of my mother's in Bedfordshire, where we heard an unhappy, pessimistic tale of farming in the face of the competition of cheap imported food; and all capital finally lost. We continued our journey towards midnight, setting up our tent at the corner of a stubble field, by a gate which led off the main road. There was a warm harvest mist, and a broken moon made enough light for the guide-rope pegs to be tapped into the ground, the poles set upright, and the pale green canvas stretched between them. Both Loetitia and Windles were so ready to help me, and the tent was up, the ground-sheet spread and the camel's-hair sleeping bags put out, without an impatient word. Two weeks of swimming in the sea and running on the sands by day, and singing in the Higher House at night after a pint of cider with the boys and girls of the holiday camp of Cryde Bay, had given me an easy outlook on life. And thinking of the two hundred and thirty-five acres that were now ours, which I would see on the morrow with the two nice people beside me, I sank with a deep sigh of contentment into sleep.

The next morning, after grilling kippers on a wood fire, we struck camp and went on, with a mild relief that no farmer had come to turn us out of his field. We left the camp tidy, all paper burned and the fire obliterated. This was one of the happiest

journeys of our joint lives: travelling with windscreen flat, in helmet and goggles, while the warm air of the harvest fields of Bedfordshire became hotter: then the midday ease of eating a fruit and brown-bread lunch under the hedge of one of the wide flat fields of Cambridgeshire: and on again, Windles in the back seat leaning forward, watching the rush of the road and the needle of the speedometer. On the road to Newmarket we had a race with a small modern car, and he shouted for more speed, to leave the mass-produced boxed-in affair behind. We could not leave it, however, as our top speed was now only seventy; but after going flat out along the road by the Severals, where race-horses were being exercised, we stopped at Newmarket, and he saw, to his delight, a fuzz of steam coming from under our rival's radiator.

So we came to the long straight highways of the Brecklands, that forsaken tract which the Forestry Commission had planted with fir-trees, and through which my car had always been hurrying, usually in the grey tonelessness of winter: and in the afternoon we drove slowly along the top lane to the farm, through an ancient gate, and so to the pines on the Castle Hills, as the grassland was called in the Deeds.

Through the trees, which grew along and down the slope above the farm buildings, we saw the meadows and beyond was the sea, only less pale than the sky. We lay down on the dry turf and rested, at home on our own land.

Contentedly we pitched the tent under a pine, and strolled down to the village to buy milk and get water. Afterwards, we went to look at our new farmhouse. As we walked up the narrow village street, my heart began to beat faster: for how would the old gardener and his wife receive us? There was the fine old-world circular brick well, seen over the little wooden gate, with lilac and lavender bushes around it. We agreed it was delightful. From the large-scale map, we knew the garden was about half an acre, and there was a grand walnut-tree in the middle. At the bottom the river ran. Dare we open the gate, knock at the door, and introduce ourselves as the new landlord and family?

After some hesitation, I opened the gate, and we walked in. We stopped a moment by the well, looking down at the water,

which seemed murky, but perhaps it was the chalk. Then turning to look at the cottage, we saw that the windows were latticed, with roses and hollyhocks against the flint walls, and a fine bush of rosemary underneath. We were about to approach the porch, to tap on the door under the circular brick arch, when a swallow passed just by my head and curved up to its nest above the lintel, and by the sudden twittering it had a nest there. How lovely, said Loetitia, and I felt again as I had felt before our marriage, in the happy, careless days of nesting and following the otter-hounds along the river valleys of North Devon. Aren't you glad we bought the farm, I was saying for the twentieth time, when the door opened and a gruff voice cried, 'Be off! Cheeky devils!' and there, waving a stick, stood an old woman. 'Go away!' she repeated, in a loud mutter, as though to herself. 'Napoleon, drive them off! My father owns all this property. You've no right here! I'm Lady Norwich. Be off!'

I attempted to explain, as courteously as I could, that I was the new owner of the cottage, but she walked forward with the stick raised, it seemed best to go. So we walked to the gate, and closed it behind us.

After a while, the old lady having retired, judging by the slam of the door, we crept back to the well. A moment later the latticed window opened with a rattle, and the rusty barrel of a gun was thrust out. Instantly Windles was running up the path, through the gate, and round the corner. We followed, with what insouciance we could pretend to.

'Well, let's see Mrs. Hammet next door.'

There was another gate the other end of the wall, which led to the single cottage, which I had thought to embody into the farmhouse. The road was very narrow just there. I paced it across: thirteen feet. This was the main coast road, and several cars passed by as we stood there.

Mrs. Hammet was sitting in her cottage. She was London born, and had been a cook, she told us. Her neighbour next door was always like that, she declared, offering us a cup of tea; she was like that to everybody. No-one took any notice of her.

Apparently Napoleon and his wife had lived there twenty-five years, never having paid any rent. I asked how many rooms

there were. Mrs. Hammet thought three upstairs, and two down. She herself had one up and the one we were sitting in. That made four up and three down, I thought to myself, and the wash-house joined by the porch to the south wall could be made perhaps into a small kitchen. Electric light had just come to the village; it would be fine after the oil lamps of Shallowford.

After tea, for which Mrs. Hammet refused payment, saying it gave her much pleasure to give us that welcome, we strolled down to the sea. The way led through a fine field of barley, white in the sun. The sea was half a mile from the village, and the field ended in a plantation or land-fringe of stunted trees, and then steeply down to a pebbly shore and a creek where a fisherman's boat was moored.

We sat down on the grass, gazing out over the marshes, one vast gut-channered prairie of pale blue sea-lavender. Afar was the sea merging in summer mist and the palest azure sky. There was no sound: the air was still: not a bird was stirring. This was the sun I remembered from boyhood days, the ancient harvest sunshine of that perished time when the earth was fresh and summer seemed an illimitable shining that would never end, the reapers moving round the fields and setting up the stooks of golden corn. And sitting there, it was as though the past and present were one again, and I had entered upon my heritage of happiness.

The feeling of peace, which came from the sky, remained upon us all the next day, as we wandered over the flowery peninsulas and the islets of the land sunken between the corn-fields and the authentic sands of the sea. The drowned and salted land was of clay, grey in places and then dark brown. It was hard and scarcely to be marked by the prod of a stick. We wondered if this terrain was being raised by every flood of the sea, or was it eroded by the tides that moved, with greyish-yellow scum, rapidly along the muddied and serpentine creeks by which the marsh was channered. In some such sunny future I imagined myself wandering here, identifying the sea plants and bushes, discovering their lives and seasons as once I had done on the Santon burrows by the estuary of the Two Rivers. Would it be two years, or three, before the farm was in order,

and I could gradually fade myself out as its pioneer and founder, and have the leisure and mental freedom of the old days before the family appeared? The day was warm and still, pale blue the sky and pale yellow the sands overlaying the outcrops of clay on which our naked feet were pressing. A quarter of a mile away several dark figures were stooping, getting cockles—the famous 'Crikky blues'.

In a warm current flowing into the harbour from beyond the point of sandhills, where white-winged and distant terns were screaming, we bathed ourselves, while the gentle flow bore us along the ribbed sands. Was this the dour North Sea, this warm and gracious stream which moved us effortlessly in an inverted world wherein the sharp chalk wings of terns oared themselves swiftly under the blue sky, and the line of remote sandhills moved away from the corner of the eye? Windles was floating on his back, too, without fear—he who would never learn to swim, because he was afraid of sinking and losing the world whose every moment was keen delight, with its wild birds, racing cars, tractors, Suffolk Punches, and double-furrow ploughs. The gentle flow took him to a shoaling bank of sand, and he sat up, in a delight of relief that at last he had done what he had always hoped, and feared, to do. The warm current, we decided, was an inshore forerunner of the tide which had lapped the hot sands of the high bank by the harbour mouth, whereon the ribs of a wrecked wooden ship were darkly set.

Afterwards we dried in the sun, put on our clothes, and wandered on. Far away to the west two tiny figures were moving in the brassy haze. We viewed them with consternation, for they were a threat to our solitude. The place was discovered after all! The cocklers were part of the landscape, but these were trippers. Still, two in about ten square miles was not a large number. Perhaps they too were scowling in our direction, for that three people were spoiling their landscape.

We watched the river rushing through the outfall doors of the sluices, and wondered if sea-trout were waiting for the rising water, to swim up. Then Windles heard an exciting noise, and espying a strange machine moving round a field, he hurried away, to gaze at his first sight of a combine harvester. Drawn by a tractor, the thing cut the stalks and swept them into a drum,

threshing them and spilling the barley into sacks, while the litter of broken whitish straw was left behind on the stubble. At intervals, a fat sack was thrown off, to lie and await the lorry, which would take it to the barn, or the malting house. It seemed efficient and quick, and I learned from the driver that it was done by contract, and made a note of the address. In two years from now, I said to Windles, this combine harvester may be moving round our fields. 'Cor!' said Windles, his eyes shining with excitement.

That evening we sat in the parlour of the Anchor Inn, eating first a plate of cockles, delicately served with fine brown bread-and-butter slices, then eggs and bacon and large cups of tea. The moderate price was pleasing, and I felt I was in Devon again, before summer visitation from the towns had become almost Big Business. The tempo of the place was quiet; here was the country contentment of the real Old England. I hoped I would not find it dull, while knowing this would not happen if every day was given to work; for if money is the root of evil, the root of happiness in the country is work.

The next day we walked to the quay beside the hotel in which one winter afternoon Dick and I had first met Mr. Strawless. It was a fine sight as we rounded the corner by a flint-and-brick wall, to see many white sails filled with wind and leaning aslant the sky, and people on the quay, while behind on the shore many stalls and roundabouts and canvas-flapping shows were thronged. It was the regatta, and fifty years ago it might have been the same as it was to-day; there were painted steam-engines, with the date 1880 engraved on one boiler-plate. Ancient lorries, driving dynamos, were shaking on solid rubber tyres lapped by the rising tide. Children with bare feet darted in and out of the wheels. The sun of East Anglia shone serenely over all.

For six days we camped under the pine-tree, walking about the farm, getting to know the fields and the meadows. The grassy hills were bleached by the sun, and had no bite in them. A solitary ewe lay on a patch of stained and sanded grass near us, with a lamb. She had been attacked by maggots, from blow-flies. Thistles made the hills ragged. The barley was brown with docks on one field, grey with thistles in another. Nothing of the

farm was pleasing, except its views. In one of the meadows, which we identified as Lark's Bush Meadow, we saw a man scything thistles nearly as tall as himself; they had seeded in the swathes of previous days' cuttings, and lay in a series of silky waves visible from the road. It was as well that I knew nothing of farming, that I was almost completely ignorant of the task I had set myself, otherwise the thought of so much to be done might have weighed on me, and made me a poor companion. 'We'll cut those thistles four times a year,' I said easily, 'and after two seasons there won't be one on our farm, or a rush-clump either; and as for the docks and thistles in the arable, I'll buy a tractor and bare-fallow them, thus getting fertility back through exposure to air and rain and sun, and also killing the weeds as they come up. I'll plant nothing and have not a beast on the place until the yards are concreted and drains under them, one for liquid manure, the other for washing down the cow-house. Sam and I will make up the roads; drain the meadows; cut the hedges; repair the buildings; make pigsties and install an electric milking machine. It will mean no return in 1938, but by 1939 we shall have a grand harvest, and believe me, this plan will put the farm on its feet for a number of years. I know it will, it's common sense. I read about the value of bare fallows in the *Farmer and Stockbreeder*, and they said it put fertility back. What's the use of trying to grow crops on this exhausted land? Bare-fallowing will cost only the ploughing, and Sam and I will take turns on the tractor. That's the plan.'

It was our last afternoon, and in the evening we struck camp, saying *au revoir* to Fox Covert and Hilly Piece, Spong Breck and Hang High, and the pines on the crest of the Castle Hills. Tent packed and camp site left clean, store of dry wood collected in rush basket—Loetitia was always neat and methodical, the most willing helper in the world—we drove slowly over the pits and depressions of the grass, where sand had been taken in olden times, and down the rutted lane to the road, past the man who had been cutting thistles on the meadow, and now was cutting barley with the same scythe. 'Opening it up,' he cried, mopping his brow. 'We're cutting to-morrer.' Then, 'You're the new farmer, aren't you? Well, I wish you luck. You've got a job!'

'I'm looking forward to it.'

'Ha ha! That'll be the best part of it, you'll larn! You doan't know what you got before you. See this field of barley? Well then, my master had one hundred acres like this, rotten-ripe that wor, and I beg him to cut, but he say, Wait you a day or two longer, then we'll have a fine-ale malting sample, he said. I beg him to cut, but no, Wait you a day or two, Charlie, he said. That night came a tempest and laid what it didn't knock off, and do you know how many coombes he lost? Six coombe an acre, six hundred coombe in all, and do you know what barley made that year? 'Twas just after the War, and barley wor nigh on three pound a coombe. Most of two thousand pounds my master he lost in that harvest alone.'

He may have been trying to frighten me, so I gave him two shillings. He spat on the coin for luck, tossed it, and slipped it in his pocket, then wished me the best of luck. I was about to go through a gap in the low and ragged hedge, when he bade me return; and after looking round anxiously, motioned for me to bend my head down, for his low-voiced mutter, 'Keep you your own council, my man, but doan't you let them as might, do you, 'bor. They're all out to do a foreigner, only doan't say I said so!' With several winks and nods he confirmed this warning. Again I thanked him, and feeling confident of my ability to defeat that which had defeated others, drove away into the ruddy gold of the westering sun.

Chapter Ten

PREPARATIONS



On the occasion of my walk over the farm with Mr. Richard Barkway in the past winter, he had told me that sooner or later, probably sooner, the tenant of Old Castle Farm would go bankrupt. The question was, would he do so before September the 11th, which was a month before Old Michaelmas Day, the time when farming tenancies were renewed or given up in Norfolk. It meant a difference of £100 to me; for if I gave him notice to leave, I would have to pay him a year's rent for disturbing his business; whereas if he went bankrupt first, I as landlord would be entitled to 'enter into the holding and take possession'.

As September the 11th drew near, I wrote somewhat anxiously to Mr. Barkway and reminded him not to forget to serve notice to quit, for I was counting on starting to farm on the following Old Michaelmas Day. Mr. Barkway replied that he had served the notice; and soon afterwards he wrote again, saying that Mr. Strawless had made a Deed of Assignment with his creditors, and that he had written to my Solicitors for instructions.

From Mr. Marjoribanks came a letter telling me that I was entitled to levy a distress upon the goods of Mr. Strawless, since he owed six months' rent, which became due at Michaelmas. Would my Agent advise me if this was worth while and also would I decide if I wanted to take proceedings to re-enter and determine the lease.

By the afternoon's post came a letter from Mr. Barkway, saying that the Trustee had inquired, Would I like to have possession of the farm in the near future, instead of at Michaelmas 1937? Incidentally, wrote Mr. Barkway, if I took over the farm

next April, I would save the £100 which otherwise would be payable for Disturbance.

The prospect alarmed me. I was not prepared for it. What would I do? How would I begin? What about my broadcasting contracts? The book I was writing? Where was Sam, had he started? By every air mail letters crossed the seas between us. Alone, I could not face the prospect of taking on all those tasks. I was scared, because I was ignorant and unprepared.

What ought I to do? I asked Loetitia. She did not know.

This new situation upset my plans. I was not ready to begin ploughing right away; so I did not see how I could get it done. (I knew so little that it did not occur to me then that I could easily have all the ploughing done by contract, for less than the £100 Disturbance money.) Having to make a decision irked and discomposed me. My mind tended to balk, to push it away as an irksome thing: for I was rewriting a book. But an answer was needed: so I suggested that Mr. Strawless should carry on, on condition that he renounced the shooting rights. Mr. Marjoribanks replied that he considered this was impracticable; but he would advise my Agent that I did not want early possession of the farm. Behind my wish not to take over the farm, was the thought that if I did so, I might lose the considerable sum which otherwise would be due for the bad state of the fields and buildings. In the lease, which I pondered that night, Clause 5 stated that the tenant should

At his own cost and charges to keep, maintain and leave in good tenantable repair and condition the whole of the buildings and all fixtures pumps wells walls fences gates gate posts bridges culverts and drinking places in and upon the said holding and which are occupied therewith or which may at any time during his tenancy be erected or constructed on the holding and also keep the gutters and downspouts connected with buildings and other erections clean and free from obstructions at all times and in every fifth year from the date of his entry in a proper and workmanlike manner paint with two coats of good oil colour and twice tar all outside wood and iron-work usually painted upon the aforesaid holding and the inside of all doors and shutters opening outwards and the inside of all windows and all gates and fences which are usually painted or tarred. Being allowed materials where necessary as agreed by the Landlord (with

the exception of straw for the thatching which shall be provided free of charge by the Tenant) and the Tenant will pay the labour and do at his own expense his own carting of materials whether for repairs new buildings or replacements or otherwise as required by the Land ord.

The Agreement signed by Mr. Strawless was a formidable thing. All the hedges had to be kept in good growing condition, properly cut and laid each year, the gaps not to be filled with dead thorns, but to use stakes and binders or posts and rails. Gates to be hung properly, and gate-posts set up correctly; all ditches to be scoured. That meant thousands of tons of silt and reeds from the meadows! I imagined great heaps of the stuff, spread on the fields. What corn would we grow from that fertile compost! Nothing on the farm would be wasted in future. Meanwhile, 'if at any time the Landlord or his Agent shall notify him of any neglect of the repairs specified above and the Tenant shall neglect to carry out the repairs so specified within two months of such notice then it shall be lawful for the Landlord (without prejudice to any other remedies he may have) to carry out the work himself and to recover the cost of labour on such repairs as if it were rent in arrears.'

Mr. Strawless had agreed to keep a good head of stock on the farm; not to sell hay, straw, or manure; not to sublet any of the land; to farm in accordance with the rules of good husbandry; to keep it 'free from thorns, rushes, thistles, docks, gorse, and bracken and in particular to cut the thistles every year before seeding and to eradicate and to spread all anthills and mole-hills'; not to plough the grassland, on a penalty of thirty pounds an acre.

A few weeks later I went to Norfolk, to meet Mr. Barkway and discuss with him what was to be done. We met one wet November morning by the broken-down gate at the end of the top farm lane, which divided the fields called Fourteen Acres and Twenty-one Acres. He had his clerk with him, carrying the roll of maps and a large notebook, for recording the list of repairs to be presented to the Trustee. I learned that the Trustee was Mr. Stubberfield, who had sold the farm to me. Well, he would know all about its condition, I thought.

For five hours we walked over the land, and peered at the premises by the big chalk quarry below the trees. Repair walls, make new door frames, new doors, renew threshold boards, repair spouting, fit iron tie-rods to hold cracked walls, fix new posts and rails to the yards, refix decayed gutterings, repair roofs, renew eleven gates, replace twelve hanging-posts and nine clapping posts, tar all woodwork, renew hundreds of tiles and battens and rafters, thousands of tiles. In the dull November afternoon light we stood by the broken-down gate where we had met in the morning. Closing the book, Mr. Barkway spoke incisively, like a general giving final orders before a battle.

'This is the plan of campaign. We'll write to Stubberfield and ask him to do these repairs, offering to supply materials immediately. He won't do them, of course. We'll repeat the offer, after a month. He'll again temporize, I expect; for his strategy will be to delay, until he gives up the farm, then to let the thing be settled by arbitration. But we won't let him get away with it! If he refuses to do the repairs after say, three months, we'll do them, in accordance with the clause in the Agreement, and then distrain on his stock for the cost of labour. Do you agree?'

'Certainly,' I replied.

'Well, good-bye. Going back to Devon?'

'To London, to-night.'

'You've got a cold journey! Good-bye.'

My feet were wet and muddy, but at last the hundred and twenty miles to London were over. After some food before the fire in the Barbarian Club, I began to feel a glow of happiness in the mental viewing of new pressure-creosoted gates on hanging posts, fastened by new chains to their clapping posts (I'd paint the hinges regularly once a year). The grass of the Castle Hills was green with healthy clover, after a heavy dressing of basic slag; the meadows were drained and on Spong Breck and Hilly Piece grew great crops of corn from the black peaty soil spread on them, heap by heap and acre by acre. I saw my new roads and concrete yards, the trim hedges and rows of apple- and plum-trees on the lower grassy slopes by the Corn Barn. There were plantations of larch and spruce, in which pheasants hid.

The children's ponies grazed on the meadows. Our rubber-tired carts left no ruts in the field. Not one louse or mite lived on a horse's legs. Old engine oil killed every tick on our sows. Our turkeys were always inoculated against black-head or whatever was allowed to kill them on inefficient farms. I would get thick Canadian hunting shirts, of large black and white check, for the men. No more rags and tatters for Hodge on our farm! There would be a Red Cross first-aid box for cuts and scratches; a veterinary chest for animals; rat-proof bins for the corn, and I'd have a pair of white owls living in the granary, to catch the mice.

Sam was on his way home. The latest air-mail letter was from Sierra Leone, where his cargo ship was unloading a cargo. He filled in his time by studying the Theory of Mixed Farming, and answering the examination questions set by his postal correspondence course. When not working on the Examination papers, he amused himself by reconditioning the ship's dynamo, and giving a hand to the engineers.

The next day I went to sign the Will which Mr. Marjoribanks, after some correspondence, had drafted and redrafted for me. At first we talked of fly-fishing, as befitted Brothers-of-the-Angle, as Mr. Marjoribanks described it. After a few appropriate remarks about the chalk stream of which I was the fortunate possessor, 'Well, I think you can now be sure we have covered all your wishes,' as he unfolded a white folio of immaculately typed matter. 'Perhaps you will just run your eye over it?'

I tried to read the first paragraph which defined the term 'eldest surviving son'. I got through that, but at the end my eye had ceased to run. Indeed, it hardly moved now. Heavens, there were more than a dozen or so pages of stiff parchment-like paper. Mr. Marjoribanks stood by the desk at which I sat, his gold fountain pen placed at my disposal on a clean blotter; and as I read, or pretended to read, he crossed the room on the deep silent carpet and pressed the bell. Almost immediately his clerk entered, with the least movement of body, and stood there in an attitude of attendant expectancy. Heavens, what a position I'm in, I thought, trying to get the hang of a sentence of several

hundred words without so much as a comma and apparently verbless. My eyes and mind refused and lifted off the desiccated rigmarole which was the heirloom prose of generations of lawyers serving the permanent property of England. As for my few personal possessions—a few old coats and boots, rods, ancient 12-bore, books, a table or two—these comprised a list that might have been compiled as an inventory for a junk shop. My half-dozen bottles of Algerian wine and jar of mouldy tobacco had a paragraph to themselves even—wines, bins, cigars, cheroots, tobaccos, etc. This it was to be a landed proprietor!

Sam was the trustee and executor if I died. He was to carry on the farming business, having full powers over all moneys, copyrights, dividends, etc. Poor old Sam and the vacuum cleaner delivered to Mrs. General—well, he was tough now. At twenty-five years, the eldest surviving son would share the burden with him. Oh hell, I couldn't read any more.

'I hope it is satisfactory! I think we have covered every point you raised,' murmured the suave voice of Brother-of-the-Angle Marjoribanks, as he placed the gold pen half an inch nearer my Will. 'Mr. Smith!' he beckoned with slightly raised digit, murmuring in my ear, 'The witness.'

I took up the pen, scrawled my name, then repeated Mr. Marjoribanks' incantation. 'I declare this to be my last Will and Testament!'

But it was not over yet. Every page had to be initialled and counter initialled by Mr. Marjoribanks and Mr. Smith. At last it was done, tied with green silk, and locked in the safe; now I could grab my hat and hurry down the stairs, and out of the swing doors into the street, free of the monstrous verbiage of the law. Anyway, I thought, as I went round to the Barbarian Club for hot buttered toast and tea, I need never see the damned Will again, I could always write another one for myself, filling it with as many punctuation marks as I liked, and even adding a few jokes to liven up the thing.

Chapter Eleven

MY MANAGER ARRIVES



Sam arrived unexpectedly, six hours earlier than he had telegraphed. I had planned to greet with a great wood fire in the open hearth the traveller from African suns, with a two-year Devon bullock steak grilled on the embers by 7 p.m., and a room-warmed bottle of Algerian wine. Instead, another telegram delivered just before noon announced his arrival on the train a few minutes after noon.

As the train drew into the platform, with its single line, and oil-lamps and rambler roses climbing over the faded station name-board, I found it difficult to face Sam. I withdrew into the little goods-room, and watched a tall, big-headed stranger wearing glasses and an unfamiliar long and heavy greatcoat carefully descending from a narrow carriage door, opening mouth to say 'Ha' to a flushing, smiling Loetitia, and shaking her gravely by the hand. I had a desire to remain aloof, together with a forced urge which tried to smother this desire, and make me go forward and greet the stranger with the geniality and welcome customary in England towards one's guests. The result was a compromise, a hesitant moving forward with expressionless face and a 'Hello' which probably appeared to have geniality forced in it.

Was this grave, soft-spoken, diffident stranger the Sam I had seen off from the Tilbury Docks a whole world of time ago? The large hand seemed to enclose all of mine. I found it difficult to say anything real, so I inquired about the journey from Liverpool, scarcely heeding the answer. Sam was very attentive to my remarks; but I felt that he, too, was constrained.

That evening, the reserve still being between us, I tried to

account to Sam for the supposed eccentricities and vagaries of my sort of person. Once, I said, in the days of working as a reporter on a Sunday newspaper, I had met a clear and authentic genius. He was a Polish boy who was a phenomenal chess-player. He was only ten years old, but already he had beaten most of the champion chess-players in Europe. He was staying with his parents in one of the dingy rows of tall Victorian houses of St. John's Wood. His father was a peasant, smiling and round-headed; his mother was slimmer, dark, with brooding eyes, a woman of natural refinement. The child himself was at first glance not remarkable: the usual small boy in a sailor-suit; but after a few moments one had an impression of power and directness coming from him, not due even in part from the fact that he knew himself to be an infant prodigy. His eyes were firm and their gaze immediate and direct; his brow gave a sense of hard power, with the temples slightly pronounced, but beautifully balanced, as though armoured against the penetrating or disintegrating thought of others. When he was asked to feed hens in the garden, for a photograph, he strode from the room through the open french windows and scattered the grain; but when I attempted to take some, idly to throw a handful, instantly he removed the box from my reach, with a look that overcame and dismissed me. I was told that he had seen a butcher's boy riding a bicycle past the house on his first day there; and had run out, to watch him. It was the first bicycle he had seen. He asked his manager for one; and when the boy came along the next morning, he got on the machine, and after a few hesitant moments to feel his balance, rode after the boy and overtook him. After that, no further interest in the bicycle.

It was so in chess-playing, I went on; the young prodigy moved from board to board of his scores of opponents, making a move, then passing on, concentrating his thoughts for a powerful moment, making a move again, then passing to the next problem. He had beaten as many as fifty players, all skilled men, in one evening like this. He was mental power concentrated, behind a will that swiftly turned his thoughts into materialization by action. He was a genius, who had never been thwarted, thanks to a good-natured complacent father and a watchful

mother. Napoleon must have been such a child, though frustrated a little, thus growing to maturity with what is called a flaw in his nature or character. So you see, Sam, I concluded, the man of genius is the pure expression of natural force; though often in life his expression may be the opposite of pure. There are, too, many and varied degrees of genius, ranging from pure force to a small or patchy talent of the irregular or intermittent creative artist who is usually an unhappy man, owing to that very indecisive mixture of God and Mammon within him. 'So you see, Sam, I'm a bit of a mixture—I suppose. You might find me a bit difficult, that's why I've had to explain things.'

'Ah,' said Sam, making the only comment so far on the monologue. At this moment Loetitia came in to announce dinner. She was sorry it had not been possible to grill the steak on the wood fire, for it was frozen beef, all she could get from the butcher who came round twice a week to the hamlet. It had to be soaked in water first, and that would have caused it to lose colour, and she didn't think I would like to see it over my embers.

'It's all the same to me,' said Sam. 'I'm longing simply to taste a bit of English meat again!'

'Er, well, it's not English, actually,' I began to explain, 'but comes from a chain-store group tied up with hundreds of millions invested in South America. Why we have the stuff in the house I don't know.'

'Well, dear,' said Loetitia, 'you did say you'd get the steak from Molton, and also I'm trying to economize, and this is one of the ways.'

'Ha, hum, it smells frightfully good to me,' said Sam, sniffing appreciatively. 'By Jove, it's good to be in old England again.'

We sat down to the first meal of our new life together. I poured two full glasses of Algerian wine and drank mine rapidly. I urged Sam to do the same. The bottle was soon emptied. I opened another. Sam and I were talking freely and affably about the old days. We were up on Cranmere again, in the rain and the fog, to get particulars for the otter book, while the motor-cycle and sidecar waited miles below. Then he was taking me to a wedding at Buckland Brewer, on the back of his tall pre-war motor-bike, rather fast because it was late. I was

clutching my new over-size top-hat in one hand and umbrella in the other, swaying round muddy corners with legs dangling, and praying that Sam knew about the laws of gravity and side-slip. Without mishap I got stiffly off the carrier, round the corner before the church. Sam was in his greasy overalls. The bride, a young London woman who had come to live in the district with her mother and sister and brothers a year or two before, had told me that her wedding was to be a 'swish one', and had warned me to appear correctly dressed; hence the tall hat and tails and striped trousers, with new boots and white spats, specially made in St. James's Street for the occasion. Something had happened about the 'swish', for as I joined the other guests I saw myself to be the only man so dressed. The retired colonels, the village squire, and other men guests were clad in ordinary tweeds. I felt a fool. The 'faultless Lincoln and Bennett' of pre-war magazine fiction, ordered by post from self-measurements of my cranium, wobbled on my head, despite the several layers of newspapers stuffed into the lining. My fear was it would either fall off, disclosing the paper, or else settle down over my ears, giving me the appearance of a Yiddish comedian on a provincial music-hall. Fortunately nothing happened until after the wedding reception, when, my glass having been repeatedly filled by the bride's younger brother, I observed my hat being kicked around the lawn by a wild scrum of girls, and youths in naval uniform. Eventually I returned to Sam's house late in the afternoon, in the baker's cart, lying with mixed feelings, induced by mixed drinks, among some loaves.

I was exerting myself in these reminiscences, trying to create a flow of feeling between us. Sam listened agreeably, his eyes growing more and more sleepy. What had he been doing since those days, I asked. His eyes became more alert, and he told me of his adventures tramping hundreds of miles in search of work after arriving at the Cape. He had had a tough time, being unable to get work in electrical engineering as he lacked proper qualifications. With his brother he had walked nearly a thousand miles in search of work, ending up in a gold-mine, where they worked several months, building themselves a shack on a near-by *kopje*. When this failed, he and some new friends started an airport, inspired by one of them who had been an Ace in the

World War, he said. The Ace designed the machine, and it took them fifteen months to build it, in their spare time. The brothers were working on a tobacco farm.

As the day for the first flight came round, Sam noticed the Ace was getting more and more withdrawn into himself, more mystical; and the day before the ceremony, which was to be watched by the Mayor of the local town, as the beginning they hoped, of an All-Empire Flying Service, the Ace was found to be in a condition which appeared to Sam to be that of complete intoxication. He explained, however, that he was suffering from malaria, which always affected his speech and gave him a shaking of the limbs, causing him to be unsteady on his feet, and generally to be unsure of himself. It was his crash behind the German lines, he declared; but he would be all right on the morrow. On the morrow he was a little better, but deadly pale as he approached the Aard-Vark, as the aeroplane had been christened by one of the fellows' mothers. He took off with glazed eyes, and when he was near flying speed lifted his tail too much, so that he nearly went nose first into the veldt but recovering, stuck the skid into the earth again and after hopping wobble left and right, rose into the air, swerved and wobbled again and then turned over on his propellor. That was the end of fifteen months' work, and after the Ace had gone away, they learned that it was the first time he had flown, for during the War he had been employed inside the sheds of an aircraft factory.

The Aard-Vark All-Empire Flying Service being wound up Sam got a chance to get into electrical engineering again. He loved the work, and at the end of seven years was in charge of a team of men erecting transformers and grids across hundreds of miles of country. Meanwhile he had been working for the A.M.I.E.E., to qualify himself for a managership; but when he wrote about the farm, all his memories of England came to him strongly, and despite the somewhat confusing contradictions in my letters, enthusiasm and optimism usually followed by pessimism and self-criticism, he thought he could make a success of it with me, and here he was.

We raised the glasses to one another.

'Cheero, Sam.'

‘Cheero, Bill.’

‘Here’s to success to the farm.’

‘Rather!’

We finished the bottle. Should I open another one? It would be cold and acid, and there was no point in having an aching head on the morrow. No, we would have a game of draughts instead? Did he play draughts? ‘By Jove, yes! Anything you like, Bill, absolutely anything you like!’

He was the Sam of old, despite the slight greying of hair above the ears, the larger hands and thicker neck: Sam always ready to listen and sympathize, to give help at a moment’s notice, to work without thought of gain: diffident, easy-going, entirely without callousness or vice.

Sam wasn’t tough.

Chapter Twelve

MORE PREPARATIONS



The idea had been to send Sam to an agricultural college, to learn how to do everything; but when I learned from the first and supposedly best place I inquired of, that the fees were £80 a term, agricultural colleges were off. So Sam distempered the walls of the cottage, painted doors, cupboards, and window frames, according to the latest plan of saving money for the farm. We were getting on, although we had not really started. Mr. Barkway had offered to supply materials to Mr. Stubberfield, at Whelk-next-the-Sea railway station. Mr. Stubberfield had not replied. My new book was nearly finished. After six weeks of painting, Sam tackled the rats in the cottage, by filling up most of the rat-holes in the wainscoting. As one hole was always being re-opened almost as soon as it was closed by Sam, I decided to take a hand. With a loaded air-rifle I sat on the sofa, late one night, listening to persistent gnawing. An old rat was about to gnaw through Sam's new floor-board. I waited, tense with immobility. When its head and shoulders eventually came through, I was unable to move, not wanting to scare it; and it dragged itself across the floor and climbed my knee, to sit there for a while washing its face with its pink hands. Such a thing, I told myself, could happen only to a writer of animal stories: but it was a fact.

Sam painted and colour-washed by day, while I walked and wrote and schemed and proposed and criticized. The nightly game of checkers, or draughts, had petered out; the result of every game was the same, despite Sam's being one night the Abyssinians, or the Italians, or the weeds on the farm, or the rats in the barn, I representing the suitable adversary.

Every letter I received dealing with the new venture was handed over for filing, after he had absorbed the contents. We had six filing books, labelled ESTATE receipts, ESTATE letters, FARM receipts, FARM letters, LITERARY receipts, LITERARY letters. The first four were Sam's affair. We collected hundreds of catalogues and filed them during the interval before zero hour, and filled a scrapbook with interesting articles from the *Farmer and Stockbreeder*. Soon we had an entire drawerful of catalogues, and needed another. Sam's shirts and vests had to be wedged into the top drawer to make room. The catalogues, in alphabetical order, were of seeds, glasshouses, well-boring apparatus, heavy caterpillar tractors and smallest garden motor cultivators, milking machines, pumps, all sorts of implements, of whose use I read about, and pondered.

I drew a map of the farm from the 6-inch ordnance sheet, and made a sketch of the buildings. I planned where our cows would enter, be milked by electricity, and sent out again. Pigsties here; liquid manure tanks there. On paper and in imagination the weeds were killed by chlorate, kainit, slasher, pitch pole, scythe, cyanamide, and bare-fallow; the composition of soils was altered; coverts and spinneys were planted; a smoked-eel industry beside the river was started; a new agricultural college for a hundred pupils was 'inaugurated'. Meanwhile Sam worked the distemper brush and got the spots on his hair and beard—for he was growing a beard, a big black beard, at my suggestion, so that he would look the part of Manager of Old Castle Farm.

When the snowdrops in the hedge-bottoms opened in the January winds, the house was repainted and rewashed. The catalogues had flowed into a third drawer, while the articles clipped from the *Stockbreeder* bulged and hung ragged from the scrapbook.

Meanwhile things in Norfolk were not getting along. Mr. Barkway wrote that after more letters he could get nothing definite from Mr. Stubberfield about the offer to deliver the materials of repair to Whelk-next-the-Sea. He had written suggesting that the work be put out to Contract, Landlord paying for materials, and the Trustee for labour. To this letter also,

reported Mr. Barkway, there was no satisfactory reply. Remembering Mr. Barkway's determined words in the lane between Twenty-one Acres and Fourteen Acres, I wrote suggesting that we should get the repairs done, and then distrain for the cost of the labour.

When the snowdrops were wilted, the Schedule of the proposed cropping for 1937 arrived. Mr. Barkway wanted me to suggest any alterations, adding that there would be only 13 acres of Roots, of which 4 acres would be Mangolds, 'not an excessive amount if it was intended to keep any stock'. Would I let him know?

Sam was called for a conference. Could he suggest anything, from all the answers he had returned to the examiners of his postal lessons? After perusing the letter, Sam frowned. Then he said, 'H'm.' After another pause he said, 'Well, it's like this. To be absolutely truthful, I've been reading so blessed much lately about farming that I've forgotten everything I thought I'd learned.'

'That's how I feel, too. What is "Layer"?"

'I'm dashed if I know.'

'Nor do I. Have a cigarette, old boy.'

'Thanks, Bill.'

Ignorance was a bond between us. And after all, Mr. Barkway ought to know if it was reasonable or not. He knew that I knew nothing about farming. He was my agent. So I replied that my partner and I approved the schedule, adding that I hoped the repairs would soon be started.

PROPOSED SCHEDULE OF CROPPINGS, OLD CASTLE FARM,
1937

<i>Field</i>	<i>Acreage</i>	1936	1937
'Fourteen Acres'	13	Barley	Roots
'Hilly Piece'	20	Layer	Layer
'Hang High'	22	Roots	Barley
'Fox Covert'	20	Hay	Oats
'Twenty-one Acres'	23	Barley and Seeds	Hay
'Spong Breck'	15	Permanent-Grass	

I must find out what Layer was. And what were Seeds? Perhaps the word was a misprint for Weeds?

There was a tithe of nearly £80 on the farm, so when I read in the *Farmer and Stockbreeder* that a Tithe Bill had been made law, whereby the money which previously had been paid to the Church, would now be paid to the Government, it was immediately arresting. The Government had bought out the Church interests; and nobody could sell tithed land in future without disclosing the charge upon it.

I read how tithe had grown, from a charitable gift of farm produce, into a parasite upon the land itself. Originally tithe had been the farmer's free gift of corn, one-tenth of the harvest, to the poor of his parish. It had been administered by the parish priest as a charity; and this charity had grown to be an annual demand by the Church, on the farmer, who in the bad seasons and depressions consequent on wars and colonial exploitation had protested, until a law was made making it payable by the landowner. By this time tithe was demanded as money, with which to pay the stipends or wages of the parish priests, who no longer gave it to the poor. Now at last tithe was commuted to gilt-edged stock, and vested in the Ecclesiastical Commissioners; and if the landowner did not pay up twice yearly, he could be summoned to the County Court, and if he did not pay then, his household goods could be seized and turned out on the lawn and sold at knock-down prices without reserve to the highest bidder. Thus the parasite, which had started its life of charity in the bowels of human compassion, had now worked its way up into the skull of its host, the land of England. No wonder Commander Trelawney, paying £80 a year tithe and income-tax at 6s. 6d. in the £ on his rent of £100, plus Land Tax at 1s. in the £., and Drainage Rates as well, had wanted to get rid of the land!

But when I bought that land, I knew the Tithe Bill was overdue to become law. The scale of payments had last been fixed in the high prices for corn following on the Great War. Barley then was 60s. a coombe; now it was 18s. for ordinary, or 25s. for the best malting grain. The Tithe Act was passed; and one of the clauses which immediately affected me, as the new owner, was that which knocked off all payments in excess of a third of the rent, or rentable value. Thus the tithe in future would be only one-third of £100, or £33 6s. 8d. It would

mean an annual saving of about £46, which at 5 per cent would mean a capital value of £920. Thus Old Castle Farm was worth about £900 more than I had paid for it! We drank another bottle of red Algerian wine that night.

But in the middle of the night I recalled an important point in the *Stockbreeder* article. Unless the annual value of the land were certified by the Tax Inspector of the district, and the certificate sent to the Tithe Redemption Commission in London, by March the 1st, that forty-odd quid would not be knocked off. Mr. Barkway was my agent: ought I to remind him? Would he think me a nuisance? By the light of a candle, I reread the article, as the clock was striking two. Yes, it was so; no remission unless it were applied for by March the 1st. So I wrote to Mr. Barkway, and after apologizing for troubling him, suggested that application should be made immediately. The reply came a few days later.

We will in due course deal with the remission of Tithe when the April instalment becomes due.

It would be too late then. So I sent him particulars of the new Act; and again mentioned I was hoping that the repairs would be started soon. Three weeks later Sam filed a letter that seemed at last to indicate a move forward.

As regards Dilapidations Mr. Strawless's Trustee is declining to face up to his liabilities, and if he does not alter his tone very shortly I shall have to deal with him rather differently.

The daffodils were rising over the seed-pods of the snowdrops and there was a run of salmon in the bank-high green waters of the river. I wouldn't have time to fish this season; the fishing must be let. Should I reserve a rod for myself? No; for then I would have to fish, and if I didn't fish, it would irk me. For two years at least, probably three, there would be no time, which was energy, for such things. After the three years, Sam would be trained and then I could go away, and lie in the sun on some far sandy shore, or idle by a trout stream; and find the freedom I had not known since the old days in Skirr Cottage.

I wrote out an advertisement, and the fishing was let. With

the money I would buy an old lorry. We wanted a large trailer, too, one that could be towed by the lorry, and be of use on the farm afterwards. Would Sam look around the district for a suitable truck?

The idea was to take the tools I had stored for Sam, from the old Works, Papa's carpenter's bench, etc., and lathes, to Creek, together with a load of yew wood I had bought from the saw-mills. This beautiful salmon-pink timber was to have been cut for gate-posts, but I bought it in time, and had the trunks sawn into planks, for a staircase in the house we should one day build on the Castle Hills. There was about a ton and a half. We must take the sailing dinghy, too, which had lain for five years in the boatbuilders' yard in the estuary.

The lorry must have tipping gear, because we wanted to make up the roads. Was there a pit somewhere near Creek, with suitable stones or gravel for road-making? I thought I would drive there in the Silver Eagle; meanwhile, would Sam look round for a likely second-hand lorry.

It was nearly April; six months before the Trustee gave up; and nothing definite about the Repairs. I wrote to Mr. Barkway again, while feeling I was making myself a nuisance. If we did the repairs forthwith, I asked, would the cost of labour be recoverable? Mr. Barkway was reassuring.

You can be sure of getting the money for doing repairs from Mr. Strawless's Trustee because you will be able to deduct it from the amount of the Tenant Right Valuation, and you are also certain of the rent from the 11th of October 1936 to the 11th of October 1937 because I can distrain for half of it on the Farm Stock, and the remaining half I can get from the Corn. I am glad you have not been farming this year, as it is, without exception, the most difficult one ; have known.

I arrived at Creek, and stayed at the local inn. Near it, was a row of empty cottages, with flint walls and tiled roofs. Making inquiries, I learned that they were empty because condemned by the District Council. They had been empty three years, and would remain so until the landlord agreed to do certain repairs. An old man passing in the street told me they belonged to Matthew Bugg, who wouldn't spend any money on them, so

they were condemned by the Rural District Council, and shut up. What were they worth, I asked. Would I be willing to pay a hundred pounds for them, asked the old man, looking at me keenly, with sideway glance. I was scared of that glance; and said I must find out first what was required to be done before the Council would permit them to be occupied again. I had read in the *Stockbreeder* that the Government were offering to give grants up to two-thirds of the cost of reconditioning old cottages, provided they were occupied by farm-labourers. The very thing for our own men!

I called on Mr. Stubberfield, and asked him if he would look over them for me, and advise me about their value. This time I was determined to do things in the proper manner. Yes, said Mr. Stubberfield, he would look at them for me; and also find out if they were condemned for demolition, for if so, of course I would not want them. And, er, I supposed he would be thinking soon of doing the repairs to the farm premises? Well, to tell the truth, he had been rather busy, what with so many auctions—farmers going out of business—and valuations of ingoing covenants, and other things. He had been meaning to look into it, and suggest something to be done. Of course, he couldn't agree, he supposed I knew (with a sideway look at me), that all the repairs that Mr. Barkway had listed in his Schedule were the responsibility of the tenant? The farm had been in a bad way when Mr. Strawless took it over. Why, Mr. Barkway practically wanted to rebuild the entire premises, which were hundreds of years old! Hadn't I noticed that date, Sixteen Eighty-Two, on one of the yard walls? Nearly three hundred years of fair wear and tear, you know, and a crack or two anyway didn't matter, the walls would be standing a good many years after both he and I had served our time! Still, something needed doing, and at the first opportunity he was going to slip over and take a look around. Meanwhile he would write to Mat Bugg, and inquire about the cottages. He'd let me know.

Oh, by the way (as I was going out of the door), I didn't want to sell the farm, did I? The Old Castle had been bought by someone who wanted the land as well, and he would be willing to consider any price I liked to suggest. He was a rich man, and wouldn't make a fuss about a hundred pounds or so either way.

Anyway, there was no harm in asking, was there? Well, he'd let me know about the cottages.

It was satisfying to know that I had bought the land when I did, otherwise it would have been too late, I told myself.

Hearing that a gravel pit near the village was parish property, I went to look at it. The pit was overgrown with trees and bushes, and the road to it was unmade, a muddy cart-track. It had not been worked for many years. It would be difficult to get a lorry anywhere near the old grass-grown slopes of the fallen cliffs. There was a chalk quarry by the hovel, or cart-shed, of my farm; but Mr. Barkway had told me that chalk turned to porridge in wet weather.

Walking up the village street, I met a man who told me he knew of a pit which I could hire for £25 a year. It had been worked by a big gravel merchant from Whelk, but he had not paid his rent, and the owner would give me a chance, having heard I wanted to make up the Castle Farm roads.

The Old Castle was being repaired and altered inside. After the years of enjoying itself as a historic semi-ruin, someone from the Midlands had seen it, and thought it the ideal place to live in. He had seen it before me; but had been waiting for the price to go down, when he would be able to buy both farm and house at a satisfactory price. The builders were making a fine job of it, putting in bathrooms in the towers, laying new floors, tearing out the old wasteful heating furnace and putting in a new one with bronze pipes, fed by a water-softening plant which removed both chalk and carbonic acid from the water. Carbonic acid? Yes, the water had been analysed, and was very nearly the hardest in England. The old pipes were almost fossils, solid with lime. I made a note of the efficient builders.

On impulse I telegraphed for Loetitia to come up. I would meet her in Norwich, the next day. She could catch the 9.1 from Filleigh, arrive at Paddington at 1.15 p.m., and get a train from Liverpool Street station which arrived at Norwich about half-past six. There I met her, and told her about the pit. She advised me to take it. Sam, she said, had found a lorry. It had been the lorry we used to see passing the house, owned by the people who had the cattle cake and pig meal stores by Filleigh station. It was the one that used to stop by Farmer Slee's with

what Robbie called the 'trumpet'. In other words, the brakes made a loud vibrating noise.

'But wasn't that the one they smashed up?'

'Yes, I think they did bend the front axle, and Sam says the engine blew up, or something, as there was no water in the radiator, also the steering is worn out. Otherwise it's not in bad condition, says Sam. The garage man who took it in part exchange says it can be repaired, and he's got a second-hand tipper to fit on it. But you must ask Sam, I really don't know anything about it,' said Loetitia, with apparent uneasiness.

While we were sitting before the fire at the inn, a man knocked at the door and asked to see me. He had a small, pale, thin face, and looked as though he had had a hard time as a boy. In a North Country voice he said he was a builder, who had come down to start in the district, which was unexploited, he declared. I had heard that a group of local speculators had recently bought nearly three square miles of land, along the coast, and had been stopped from selling building plots by the new Town Planning Act, which had registered the land as agricultural. Part of the land had been bought by some local people, of the Society for the Preservation of Rural England, who wished to affiliate it to the National Trust, which owned the bird sanctuary at the Point. I asked him if he were one of these speculators.

'No, I'm a stranger here, foreigner they call it. My name's Bly. I'm a builder. I'll do for you as well as anyone else. And cheaper too. All I ask is a chance. If any tender's going, I'm after it.'

'Well, I haven't thought about building yet, but I'll let you know if I do.'

'I buy my materials direct, cutting out the middleman. All I ask is a chance. I can save you money.' I took his name and address, and promised to give him a chance if any tenders were put out.

Before we went back next day, I paid the owner of the pit £10 in advance as half the rent for a year's lease, with the right to sell gravel and sand from it, beginning next Monday. Sam and I would be able to come up shortly with a lorry, and begin the remaking of the farm roads.

Chapter Thirteen

I BUY TROUBLE



Sam seemed so keen on buying the lorry, that I gave way to him, with the condition that he should stand by while the work was being done, to see that it was done well. It was a Morris Commercial truck, 1932 model. Although four-wheel brakes had been in use on well-designed cars and lorries for several years before that date in England, this model had brakes on the two back wheels only. It was a queer-looking lorry, and seemed to be a discarded model. I had never seen another like it on the road.

Having had unhappy experiences with local garages and the Silver Eagle, I said that this time there should not be a big bill for indifferent work. For a fortnight Sam stood about in the garage, and watched the work. The engine was removed, and sent away to a Bristol firm, the cylinders to be relined and new pistons fitted, the crankshaft reground. The king-pins of the axle and steering and the phosphor-bronze bearings to be renewed, with the bearings of track rod and dumb-iron. The gear-box was to be washed out and examined for worn cogs; a new battery fitted; a new front axle. Heat-treating of the old bent axle in a local forge was not good enough. The radiator was to be tested, and sent away for repair if it leaked; the lamp wiring to be renewed. A good second-hand tipping gear was to be fitted. The bottom of the truck-body was to be encased with sheet-iron for better tipping of gravel and flints. The torn driver's seat to be repaired. The brakes to be relined and the 'trumpeting' cured. Two coats of good green paint to be laid on. The whole job, with the lorry, to cost £68.

The day promised for the delivery of the lorry arrived, but

no lorry with it. The migration was postponed a week. The trailer, nearly ten feet long and six feet wide, low and light, with towing bar at one end, and single detachable horse-shafts of larch on the other end, was ready. I was delighted with it. It had lades for hay at each end, fitted at the feet with iron hooks holding to rings bolted into the deal bottom-boards. The sides were detachable. The rubber wheels, on an old front-axle of a lorry, were boxed in elm-wood. It would carry easily a ton and a half of hay or straw, and was so light when unloaded that one man could move it without effort. It was painted dark green, which was the colour decided upon for all the farm carts and implements.

When *was* the lorry going to be ready, I asked Sam, at the end of another week, when he reported that it was still unfinished. It was the engine, he said. I replied that we had already wasted two weeks' rent of the gravel pit, and there were about two thousand five hundred yards of road to be made by September, in addition to several 600-mile journeys for the furniture.

I went to see the garage proprietor. He soon got busy on the telephone. The engine, he reported, would be dispatched the next day. By passenger train? I inquired. He didn't know. I suggested he telegraphed at once, ordering it to be sent by passenger train.

Meanwhile, why had the brakes not been relined, I asked Sam. Oh, said Sam, they had not required it, the linings were scarcely worn. But they were worn? Yes, a little. Then had he arranged to have the cost of relining deducted from the estimate? He hadn't come to that yet, said Sam. But it was two weeks late already, I insisted. And was that the new axle? No, it was the old one, it had been straightened in the forge, and was as good as new, the garage proprietor had said. It really wasn't necessary to have a new one. But, I declared, the first time I'd piled up the Eagle, the insurance people said the old axle heat-treated was good enough, but the makers said, NO, IT WAS NOT GOOD ENOUGH. Well, you needn't shout, said Sam. In a conciliatory voice I explained that most good firms supplied front axles at cost, to avoid any possible accidents due to buckling or crystallization-fracture at speed. Steel got tired, and died, like everything else; it gave up the ghost, or spirit,

and returned to its ancestral crystals. Moderate heating in a low-powered forge could not make it youthful again.

A passing mechanic, hearing the argument said, 'What the old lorry wants is a monkey-gland,' and Sam and I laughed.

'But you know,' said Sam earnestly, 'I can assure you that I have looked at the axle and seen no sign of crystallization. I can guarantee it will be all right.'

'Well,' I said, 'you seem to be a good salesman—for the other fellow. I'm sure he'll be relieved to hear you guarantee his work. But actually, old boy, you're supposed to be here watching *our* side. Business is a tug-of-war, you know, and the better side wins.'

Later, I apologized for my sharpness, which was due to anxiety, or desire, to make a success of the venture, I explained: for only by scrupulous care and precision and forethought could we confound all the prophets of inevitable failure. Sam did not bear any ill-feeling for my sharpness, and we had a pint of beer together, and looked at the garage proprietor's pigs, which he fed himself. He told us he made two hundred pounds a year out of pigs. He wished he could sell the dung, though! It was mixed with sawdust and shavings, and as there was very little arable in Devon, no-one wanted it. Many tons of it, all wasting.

'In any other country but England, it would be wanted. Do you know, in some Continental countries to-day, even the new hempen mailbags are shaken out once a week, and the dust of the fibres is carefully kept, and collected, for adding to compost heaps, to rot down and put on the land, to increase its fertility. And here are we, sending millions of tons of sewage daily into the mouth of the Thames, all the phosphates and nitrates and potash which should be feeding the soil, instead of adding to the black mud of Southend-on-Sea and poisoning the salmon which every year try to get through the filthy, cloudy water.'

'That's what our Town Council does here, in the river,' he replied. 'Last summer hundreds and hundreds of salmon parr and trout were found dead in the Free Fishing water, and the stink during the drought, pouff! you couldn't get near it.'

'The trouble is, we've got too much money, in England, and get the best of everything.'

'You may have, sir, but I haven't!'

In the pub I told Sam about the trade in bones after the Napoleonic wars, when England imported 30,000 tons from the Continent, grinding them up in mills to put them on the cornfields. Wheat was then nine times the price it was to-day. I had just read this in one of Sir Daniel Hall's books, which quoted the protest of an early nineteenth-century chemist, Liebig:

England is robbing all other countries of their fertility. Already in her eagerness for bones she has turned up the battlefields of Leipsic and Waterloo, and of the Crimea; already from the catacombs of Sicily she has carried away the skeletons of many successive generations. Annually she removes from the shores of other countries to her own the manurial equivalent of three million and a half of men, whom she takes from us the means of supporting, and squanders down her sewers to the sea. Like a vampire she hangs on the neck of Europe, nay of the whole world, and sucks the heart-blood from nations without a thought of justice towards them, without a shadow of lasting advantage to herself.

Sam looked far away in thought. He took a quick swig at his beer. 'Well, I must be getting back. There's a cut on one of the front tyres, and I'll get them to vulcanize it.'

In the interval of waiting, I bought the three condemned cottages from Mr. Matthew Bugg. Mr. Stubberfield had written that the walls and roofs seemed sound, and the price asked by the owner, £200, was round about their value. He enclosed a copy of the District Council's report on their condition.

GREAT WORDINGHAM RURAL DISTRICT COUNCIL

re Cottages at Creek

Owned by M. Bugg

Particulars of Sanitary Defects.

North Cottage. House dilapidated and damp. Roof, floors, and ceilings defective. Dark and dilapidated Pail Closet in yard at rear—and pail has to be brought through house to empty contents, there being no other entrance to yard. No drainage or facilities for washing. Yard at rear unpaved and at higher level than house floor.

Middle Cottage. As above, but with west wall bulged and leaning. Pail Closet in garden.

South Cottage. As above, but Pail Closet in yard at rear, pail being carried through house.

Mr. Stubberfield wrote that Mr. Bugg said there was another prospective buyer, so perhaps I would let him know as early as possible? I doubted Mr. Bugg's other buyer, but telegraphed an offer of £190. It was promptly accepted.

Apparently the name of the damp little row was Chapel Cottages; a slate-roofed chapel, pride of the more sober inhabitants of Creek, stood in what was once the end of the cottage gardens. Yet despite the uneven tiled roofs, the cracked and bulging walls, the dirty frayed wall-paper, the pools of water on the plaster-littered floors, the majesty of the Law dealt with them as thoroughly as if they had been Buckingham Palace. The legal procedure known as Investigating Title was so scrupulously carried out by Mr. Mordaunt Marjoribanks that at one moment it looked almost as if some of the original ten Chapel Elders who had put their marks, black inked crosses, on the deed conveying the cottages years ago to Mr. Bugg might have to be exhumed by order of the Home Office, to prove their legal title.

The property was conveyed in 1899 to about ten persons as Trustees and when they were sold in 1920 the portion of the property which you are now buying from Mr. Bugg not all the persons who were parties to the 1899 Conveyance were made parties to the Conveyance to Mr. Bugg. Probably those who were not made parties to the 1920 Deed had died. The Vendor's Solicitors state that Certificates of death can be obtained but at your expense and this is correct.

The letter then took on an almost antiquarian aspect of the Bugg houses.

The title to this property as agreed to be deduced commences with a Conveyance dated the 15th of February 1899 to a number of persons as Trustees of the Primitive Methodist Connection in the Circuit in which the Parish of Creek is situate, and it was conveyed to them subject to the trusts and powers contained in a Deed of Release dated the 24th of March 1864 relating to certain property belonging to the Primitive Methodists at Walworth, London.

It is the practice for Non Conformist communities to have their properties conveyed to Trustees upon the trusts declared by an old Deed known as the Chapel Model Deed. The different communities have their own Model Deeds and they are probably more or less in

the same form. The Primitive Methodists have a Model Deed dated the 24th of March 1864 and the property at Creek was conveyed on the trusts of that Deed.

We have delivered some Requisitions to Mr. Bugg's Solicitors on the subject of this Deed and asking for evidence that the formalities were complied with.

At last words were done with, and I was the owner of the Bugg cottages. The next thing was to apply for a Ministry of Health grant to recondition them. I felt I was beginning—at last. The lorry was ready for delivery.

Sam and I began to load it at 3.30 p.m. one day of mid-May. First we went to the hut in the hilltop field, to collect the yew-wood planks and posts which were lying there, with two of the lathes from the Boys' workshops. We were still loading after dark, having twice unloaded to get all the stuff on. We had had no lunch or tea, having been promised the lorry for noon, but the engine hadn't started, and at last it was found that the distributor was burnt out, and had to be replaced.

At midnight, the lorry, drawing the empty trailer, stood by the sandy creek which led into the estuary. We had had no supper. Two evenings before I had rowed the small dinghy, once blue and white but now discoloured and dirty, across the tide flowing in froth and chop of wavelet of the Two Rivers' division, past Crow Island, and so to the Branton Pill. We hauled and hoisted it over the sandy mud, and got it somehow on to the trailer. Roped down securely, we pushed and pulled the trailer to the back of the lorry, and dropped the pin into the hole of the towing bar. I went on home in the Silver Eagle, meeting Loetitia, who had been recalled from Westward Ho! where with the children she was staying with a friend. By telegram I had asked her to return for this important occasion, as we would have no food unless she cooked it. At 1.30 a.m. Sam arrived, after a slow journey, in which the new and stiff engine had, for a moment, boiled and seized up the steep hill out of Swimbridge. The brakes were poor, 'trumpeting' as before; and in the morning, I insisted, the lorry must be returned for the new linings.

Chapter Fourteen

ITEMS OF COSTS



HENRY WILLIAMSON, ESQ.

TO MESSRS. GAYTHORNE, WARBLE, HOGGE, AND
HATRY

*Our Professional Charges and Payments in the
following matters :*

3 Cottages at Creek, Norfolk

In connection with your purchase of the above cottages, perusing Contract, investigating title and preparing and completing Conveyance—Fee according to Statutory Scale	£ 6 13 4
For preparing and lodging particulars of the Conveyance required under the Finance Act, 1931 ..	10 6
Messrs. Lamboth, Reed & Co.—fee for production of Deed	1 1 0
Messrs. Whimper & Son, ditto	1 11 6
Messrs. Lamboth, Reed & Co.—fee for completing Stamp for Conveyance	1 8 0
Search fees, etc.	1 0 0
Will. Preparing and completing your Will of the 29th of January 1937. As made out in detail £16 1s. 9d., but say	13 4
	12 12 0
	<hr/>
	£25 9 8
	<hr/>

Received this 20 May 1937

GAYTHORNE, WARBLE, HOGGE AND HATRY
Mordaunt Marjoribanks.

Chapter Fifteen

I BECOME A ROADMENDER



At 2.30 p.m. on Friday, the 21st of May 1937 our column left for Norfolk. First went the Silver Eagle, drawing an old pattern of caravan, fitted with two beds, wash-bowl, shelves, tables, oil-cooking stove, and cupboard. Loaded, it weighed about a ton. Behind its number plate and oil tail-lamp came Sam, driving the green lorry, to which was attached the trailer, on which lay the dinghy covered by a green cloth. The lorry also had a new green hood, supported by three ash hoops.

The journey took two and a half days. The lorry averaged, for the first 60 miles, only 8 miles per hour and 8 miles to the gallon. It was supposed to do 18 m.p.g., but the engine was stiff, the ignition control was broken, the whole outfit was overloaded and the hills were both steep and frequent.

We spent the first night near Swindon, with some friends, with whom we drank a bottle of champagne with the toast, To the Farm and Success! It was my last bottle, one of two dozen bought years before.

After a mechanic in a garage had confirmed that the piston rings had probably 'taken up'—lost their springiness in the part-fused aluminium of the pistons—we continued the journey. It was miserably slow. Sometimes I crawled along behind the trailer for a change; but this irked me, and I passed to the front again. Unreasonably I upbraided Sam for having chosen such a dud vehicle in the first place. Anyone, I declared, could sell him anything. He replied, with truth, that he had not bought it; I had bought it. His part had merely been that of one sent out, in a restricted local district, to find an inexpensive lorry. The brakes shuddered, and people stared whenever we stopped,

which was frequently. Once, as I waited by a shop, signalling him to pass, I spoke to a loungeer, telling him, half seriously, that we were beginning something that one day would be famous in England's farming history. After staring at Sam's black-bearded profile under an ancient tweed fishing hat of his father's, he spat and replied, 'Is that so? Who's the old Daddy Christmas driving the outfit?'

It began to rain. The lorry went slower than before. We limped into Oxford at six o'clock on that Saturday evening. It was Eights Week, and the city streets were thick with cars and people. Neither of us could reverse; we could only stand still or go forward. How we were going to park that night was a problem. If we stopped by the roadside, it would mean lights on, and I doubted if the lorry battery was up to it. It was not a new battery, as had been stipulated. Sam said it was an old pattern. Why then had he allowed it to be fobbed off on him, I asked.

'I don't intend to be drawn into further argument,' said Sam. 'What are your intentions about the engine? Are we going to the Morris Repair Garage, if so, the sooner the better. I don't know about you, but I'm damned hungry.'

A policeman directed us to the Morris Garages. Fortunately the entrance was wide and we drove into a space between hundreds of cars. The manager shook his head.

'Repairs? My dear sir, it is Eights Week'—with a wave of his hand over the other cars. I explained we were on a long journey, and surely he could find a mechanic, to look over the engine, which was constantly overheating. We suspected that the timing was late, and couldn't it be checked? If, on the other hand, it was a question of scored cylinders or pistons, then we must wait and get it done the next day, or on Monday. It was essential, I persisted. At last he weakened, and called a mechanic.

We went out to get some food. The restaurant was crowded. We waited ten minutes, then I got impatient, saying that one of us ought to be learning about the engine, watching the mechanic; and since Sam did not move, I sprang to my feet, and hurried down the High to the garage.

The mechanic had found the broken ignition lever, which had caused the engine to run on a retarded spark, thus heating it.

Also he said that the plugs were dud, with burnt-out and over-wide spark-gaps. Why hadn't Sam seen they were checked? I fumed to myself.

Sam came in a few minutes later. He had not had any food. I said I was sorry for my impatience; but this did not alter his reserve. I felt it was a hopeless venture; but food would make things seem less miserable. We went out and had a pint of beer, and some fish and chips in a near-by place.

Afterwards we returned to the garage. About 11 p.m. we were ready to continue. The bill for new plugs and the tune-up was £1 12s. We left the luminous streets and wide squares behind us for the narrow dark road to Bicester and beyond. The stars shone overhead, though their brilliance was somewhat dulled by the indigestible and greasy food inside me.

Midnight came; and one o'clock. Where could we sleep? I looked left and right continually, for a space in which to draw in, but could see none. At last I saw a gateway with grassy field beyond, good for turning-in? I stopped the car, and walked into the field. A low roar came from the darkness. Was it a bull? In the torchlight the beast's eye glinted red. Onwards again, into the dreary small hours across Buckinghamshire.

About two o'clock, weary of all things, I decided to pull-in on the grassy verge of the road. There were about fifteen yards of rough, down-sloping grass between road and hedge. I drove on to the slope. The caravan lurched. The back wheels of the Eagle spun. It was soft, damp ground.

I swore, and stopped the engine. Sam followed, and examined the ground. I said we must unhitch the caravan, and haul it out by the pole, which was inside. We couldn't possibly shift it that way, said Sam. We must try, I yelled. Very well, keep calm, he replied. The caravan leaned sideways at a steep angle. Its iron hitch was pressed heavily on the tow-bar of the car. It was immovable.

'I can get you out of the difficulty, if you leave it to me,' said Sam.

'How?'

'By towing you with the lorry. We've got a long rope. I've done such things dozens of times in Africa, though you won't believe it.'

'Right ho. I've failed, so you try your way.'

Sam and I unhitched the trailer, which was heavy, but balanced. Then he passed the rope around the front axle and tied it to the lorry tow-bar.

'Won't it break?'

'I doubt it.'

'Best double it, to make sure.'

'All right.'

The rope was doubled. I got in the car, and started the engine. The lorry moved forward, took up the slack; a slight jerk and I was moving. Easily the lorry drew me on to the road.

'Well done, Sam!'

'I told you I could do it. I've been on the veldt for days and weeks with a column of lorries. The trouble is you want me to think with your head all the time, instead of letting me do things my way.'

Soon we came to the dark silhouette of a group of buildings, which turned out to be a gravel-washing and sifting plant. There was a concrete semi-circular entry and exit from and to the main road. It was an ideal parking place. We pulled in, made the beds in the caravan, and lay down to sleep.

As I look back, I wish I had been able to take that journey easily. I wish we had been carefree enough to have wanted to swim in the azure waters of the gravel pit—it was Sunday morning, and no-one about. I wish that breakfast had been preceded by appropriate sniffs of appreciation for the sizzling sausages, as in all the boys' books of adventure that Sam and I read when we were young. As it was the strains of the journey and its delayed start were still with us, and breakfast was a silent meal, of unwanted food. But as the day grew wider, and the sun warmed us, the adventure took colour. Lorry and trailer rolled along easily over the level roads. There was an interval for bread and cheese and beer in a pub, and fine natural countrymen to talk to. All through the day of blue and white skies we moved, past fields of waving meadow grass, and rising green corn. Through the great flats of Cambridgeshire, along the north of Suffolk and the beautifully kept Six Mile Bottom estate, and so to the heaths beyond Newmarket—the wild Brecklands—with their long straight roads over the heaths and

through vast plantations of fir. These were now familiar roads, bordered by twisted dark fir-trees and ruined poplars; on and on, to the country south of the Wash, winter home of the wild geese—our future home.

And at last we were moving down the narrow village street, first the car and caravan, then dark green lorry with trailer topped by sailing dinghy, turning right over the bridge and down the deep-rutted farm-road, through the tattered gate, and so to a stop before the corn barn.

There we left the lorry, and returning on foot to the entrance, went up the hill to the top lane, and so across grass to the site of the camp. Once again the caravan stuck in the sandy slopes, and was free only after two hours' digging. We got to bed about midnight, supperless.

Next day, to work. We had four months before taking over as farmers. After the trailer was unloaded—wood in big barn (by permission of Mr. Stubberfield) and boat in the river—we looked at the lorry. One of the rear wheels was damaged, two of the bolts being sheered off, due to careless putting-on after the brakes were relined. We went to Whelk to order new bolts, and made arrangements for Sam to go into a small garage the following Sunday, to draw the pistons and inspect them. I saw the previous lessees of the gravel pit, who had written a complaining letter about being deprived of the material for their work, and arranged to let them take gravel as before on a royalty basis of 9d. a ton. They promised to keep proper records. I went out of their office feeling almost a business man. Returning to the farm, we said we ought first to find out what roads were to be made up.

We paced the rutted ways, silently stepping one behind the other, notebook in hand. We reckoned about 3,000 yards. Some of the wheel-ruts of the past winter were fifteen inches deep in turf and half-dried mud. We reckoned we wanted at least a thousand tons of flints. We drove to the pit, to see what it was like. We had one pick; a heart-shaped Devon long-handled shovel; a short-handled heavy shovel called a 'Welsh Back-breaker', used for making dams in the river at Shallowford; and one wide shovel.

The capacity of our tipping lorry was supposed to be thirty

hundredweight. We started to pick down the tight-packed flints and chalky gravel, and to fill the body. Our shovels were the wrong shape: each thrust into the hard mass was like trying to push over the hill beyond. When we'd been stooping and shoving and heaving and pausing and stooping again, for about half an hour, we saw it would be easier if the side of the lorry were dropped, as well as the tail-board. Our backs ached, patches of our hands began to show red, and to hurt. The sun shone down. I took off my shirt. R.A.F. airplanes of the new aerodromes being made in Norfolk roared overhead, but we were too earnest to look at them. One thousand tons in four months to be dug, carted, and spread, after clearing the mud and turf of the ruts. Would the lorry never look as though we were filling it? We told each other the lorry must not be over-filled, we could not afford a breakdown. Was it two tons? We asked the foreman of the gang of gravel-shifters in another corner of the pit. He came over and looked at our load. About a yard, he said. A yard—a cubic yard—was about a ton and a quarter, we learned.

Would it never be filled? Lord, we had to fill the damned lorry five hundred times in four months! I felt I could never lift another shovel in my life. At last it was filled, and Sam drove off, to the main entrance of the farm, which had been under water in the winter, and now was a half-dried morass of broken bricks, old tins, and worm-eaten laths—the decayed portions of the Old Castle had been strewn there, presumably as some attempt to fulfil Mr. Strawless's agreement to keep the road in good repair.

We got out of the cab, fixed the cranked handles, and began to turn, to raise the body on the upright iron tipping screw. At once it was apparent that the second-hand tipping gear we had bought as re-conditioned was worn out. The cogs inside the screwing box grated. We pushed and pulled at the handles. At last the body was tilted; but the gravel remained unslidden. It did not tip off. The old worn screw upright had been shortened, and did not lift the body sufficiently high.

We lowered the body again, and began to shovel off the stuff.

We brought another load in the afternoon, and threw it off, with broken-blistered hands, after which, wet with sweat, we

stood back and surveyed our first day's work. Four tons, covering 8 square, or 2 linear, yards of road. Our estimate obviously had been wrong, 1,000 tons for all the roads. We would want at least 1,500 tons. It was overwhelming. We both felt hollow; a pint of beer each, and bread and cheese had been our only food that day. We sat down and tried to plan the next few weeks of work. Obviously big flints or boulders would be needed for the causeway through the meadows. Even if we laid five loads a day, if, IF we could spread ten tons a day, that would take five months not counting Sundays. Five months; and we had only four months.

'And in this four months, too, we must get a concrete-mixer and lay down drains and concrete all round the farm premises. We must dig a well and lay pipes for water. You must erect posts and lines for electricity, Sam, as well as study about farming, and also we must acquire at auctions all the implements we will want. First I must find out what various jobs the various implements are for. Also I mustn't forget the writing, for only by that can we pay for the family in Devon, and the materials up here. And, heck, I've forgotten the farmhouse! You'll have to wire it for electricity, Sam, and we must get a bathroom built on to it. Perhaps little Bly can do it? What, do it ourselves, Sam? Oughtn't we to limit our plans? Mustn't take on too much. How about putting the lorry away now? I'm tired—we ought to get a steak, and fry it. To-morrow, I've got to meet the builder about the Bugg houses. He's the chap who's made such a decent job of the Old Castle.'

During that first week, we both found it hard to keep on with pick and shovel in the pit. We knew we were bound to feel stiff and depressed, just because our body tissues were being changed by the very hard labour of digging all day. While Sam cooked eggs and bacon, or boiled a rabbit he had shot, I replied to letters and wrote my book. I'd had blisters before, digging trenches, rowing, felling trees; but never the kind that ached or burned, all night, the very nerves or sinews or bones of the hand aching. It was the repeated shocks or bruising of the pick on the flint wall of the quarry. Also, I learned what it was to have the eyes momentarily and forcibly closed by the sharp sting of sweat. (Was it nicotine, or because my ever-

active brain created phosphates in the blood-stream?) I found out, also, that hard body work uses energy as an engine uses petrol. Without good food, there is no power. I found out, too, that beer, beer made from barley, was a food. When languid with fatigue, a pint of beer gave me energy for at least another forty minutes.

We had been working four days when a labourer came up and asked for a job. There was much unemployment in the village. The labourer explained that he wasn't much good for hoeing, which was seasonable just then, as he had lost an eye chopping wood a year or two back. He hadn't worked for some time, and would take a week to get into trim; but he'd work hard and do his best, if we'd give him a trial.

We took him on. The first day he looked weary, and I stopped and bought him and ourselves a glass of milk each. He raised it and wished me the best o' luck on the farm. You're doing a fine job, sir, if you can stick it. It's time this land was done decently again, as it was in the old days. Soon he was in trim, and proved a willing and punctual worker. We paid him the current Norfolk labourer's wage, of 32s. 6d. for a 48-hour week. Soon we had another helper, a young red-headed labourer who looked too slim for hard work; but he had a steady strength, and never seemed to tire.

After the first fortnight, and with the help of our two good men, road-making was easy, even pleasurable. My blisters became callous skin, my sinews ceased to ache. I could sling up shovelful after shovelful—we soon got the right shovels—with ease. The yellow-white road crept up to the big corn barn, and round it, past the cart-sheds and round the pond to the granary. We reckoned that each ton cost 2s. 6d. to dig, carry, and spread; and on an average a ton covered two linear yards of the roads.

Chapter Sixteen

I OBSERVE FLIES, AND BECOME A BUILDER



When I had asked the builder who had done such a fine job on the Old Castle to meet me a few weeks before, by the cottages, he had, to my momentary embarrassment, brought an architect with him. In the pamphlet which the Ministry of Health sent out about the grants, it was printed that a panel of architects had been made to design and plan improvements to old cottages for a nominal fee, of two or three guineas. The usual fee of an architect, I had ascertained, was between 5 per cent and 10 per cent of the total cost.

The builder began by introducing me to the architect, who said that if I required his services, he would be happy to help me. I thanked him, and replied that first I would have to consider costs, before I could say definitely. Talk about money was always distasteful to me, and usually in my past life I had avoided discussion about it, accepting what was asked of me without question. This, of course, had never been to my advantage. Now, however, with a family of children to support, this softness or slackness in my nature must be altered.

We walked up and down the small rotten stairs, peering into the dark and abject bedrooms, with their strips of damp hanging paper, low sagging ceilings, and worm-eaten floors. How did coffins come down such stairs in the past? How many children slept in the tiny rooms at one time? Even the spiders and the mice had deserted them. From cracks in the ceilings the dirty black dust of centuries had ceased to trickle. In the north cottage a beetle-riddled beam, supporting rafters cut from the hedges by some ambitious labourer of the sixteenth century,

stopped most of the light of a little window, broken and hanging on its single rusty hinge. The beam was covered with layers of discoloured wall-paper. From the wooden sill a yellowish growth was spread, the fungus of decay.

As we were going downstairs, the Sanitary Inspector from Great Wordingham Council arrived. The architect asked him what was required to put the cottages in order. He replied that through a clerical error the whole lot had not been scheduled for demolition. Before the Council would pass them as fit for human habitation, they must be made habitable. More he could not say; it was outside his job to give instructions.

When he had gone, the architect and builder asked me what I wanted doing. Loetitia and I had spent some time discussing the various rooms, each of which should have a bigger dormer window replacing the miserable little openings as at present; also a new dormer window in the east roof of each cottage, for morning sunshine and a cleansing flow of air. A new higher roof along the entire block would make the bedroom spacious and healthy. There should be new floors also; and as for downstairs, new larger windows were needed, and new floors, and new larders. The wash-houses at the top of the garden, adjoining the north cottage, were ruinous, and must be rebuilt. That cottage was intended eventually for a bailiff, and there ought to be a bathroom in it. There might even be a little extra bedroom built over the bathroom.

I asked the builder if he could give me a rough idea of what all this would cost, and he said it was impossible for him to say, until the architect had got something down on paper. I had a talk with the architect about his fees. He said he would charge me less than his usual scale, and suggested thirty guineas. I said I would have to wait to see the estimates; and would he also get a tender from Mr. Bly, the new builder, whose card I gave him. The architect said doubtfully that he knew nothing about Bly; but if I wanted him to tender, he would send him a copy of the plans and specifications. First, he would send the draft of both to me, in case I wanted to add anything.

The plan arrived a week later. The cottages looked lovely in outline, ground plan, and section. The ground floors were colour-washed in pink, the upper floors in pale yellow, while

the new Roman pantiles were a realistic colour. Dotted lines showed the new sinks, the bathroom, the little extra shaving window for South Cottage (which was to be Sam's). The new cess-pit looked most efficient, with its pipes indicated by dotted lines.

The village blacksmith had lent me a copy of the Great Wordingham Council's *By-laws Relating to New Buildings* and I was reading it during the midday bread-and-cheese and beer in the bar of the Turnip Arms, where Sam and I went every day between twelve and twelve-thirty, the lorry standing outside. One point was immediately arresting: all septic tanks must be placed a minimum distance of 100 feet from any well or 60 feet from any public road, or any dwelling house or building. I was sure there was not a hundred feet anywhere in the garden before the cottages. I went there at once and paced it out; it was short by several yards.

I telephoned to the architect the drastic news. 'Oh, we can get over that,' he said cheerfully. 'I don't suppose the Housing Officer will quibble about a yard or two.'

My mind during the afternoon was not easy about sewage spreading from land-pipes laid in sand in the chalk. I knew from looking at the face of the quarry opposite the hovel that seams or strata of flints occurred in chalk beds; and any foul liquid might easily find its way down one of these and so seep into a near-by well. A hundred feet in such a case would not prevent pollution. Should the drainage system be omitted? But I must curb my desire always to attend to ideas the moment they arose urgently into my mind. I had not eaten my lunch. It was half-past twelve, and we must get back to the pit. The men were waiting outside. I stuffed it into my pocket, put the plans in my black manuscript case, and went to the pit with the lorry.

It was hot and close in the lane between Twenty-one Acres and Fourteen Acres, where we were spreading gravel. From the June sky came an eye-aching, diffused light. The sky was not open and blue, nor was it clouded, nor was it misty; the sunlight was not ardent, distillation of aerial gold fire, the summer sun of man's dream of happiness. Instead, a heavy white pressure of light, that made me screw up my eyes, and gave thoughts of sunstroke, was upon the countryside.

I was working in the lane alone, hacking up turf of a dry rut with a mattock. Two strings each side of the lane, stretched between pegs, marked the borders of the lane to be cleared before the tipping of the chalky gravel. It was close, shut in by the tall hedges, bordering hayfield on one side and turnips on the other. If there was any movement of air in the field, where half a dozen men were pitching hay from the wagon and passing fork-loads from one to another across the ragged crest of the stack, the tall hawthorns stopped it from passing in the lane. Sweat—not stinging as in the early days of physical unfitness—ran into my eyes as I worked, clad only in socks, heavy boots, and shorts. With a mattock I was breaking grass tufts and ruts of baked mud from the buried stony surface of the road. It was hard work, repeatedly striking with the mattock, bending down amidst hundreds of black flies.

For the first hour after lunch I tried to fight these flies of the lane. Dropping the mattock four or five times a minute, I caught them in clenched fists; I slapped them against legs, back, chest; I pulled them, buzzing horridly, from my ears and from my mouth. They were silly little black feeble things, seeming not to want anything from me in the way of food or drink, but insistently they regarded my moving form as a base for their excited and restless swarm-play.

Flies or no flies, the work must be done. Ten yards of grassy border had to be cleared, on both sides of the lane, before the return of the lorry. Was I one to lean on my mattock, to skrimshank because of a few flies? What sort of a farmer would I make, if a little heat and an occasional fly-touch stopped my work? I gripped the mattock, and with harder strokes chipped away the mud and pressed horse-litter of the past century.

A sudden sharp sting made me drop the curved willow handle, and slap my ribs with a brushing movement. A crushed—not squashed—brown object fell away mutely into the dust. The passing hay-wain, ragged with rye-grass, had sent a zoom of horseflies over the hedge.

Another lit on my chest; and joined its brother in the hot dust. I was skilled in obliterating the long-winged blood-suckers. Usually I located them by ear. Amidst the restless jazz of the swarm, their deeper slower buzz was immediately

noticeable: I turned my chest towards the buzz, so that the sunlight fell on a fly as it landed. I stood still for it to settle, after its usual preliminary wait of about a second; when, reassured, it began to probe with its cutting-edge snout, caution gone in the sudden thrill of finding a blood-bearing tissue—*scrish*, it was rubbed out by my open palm.

I had killed five, and was about to bend to the hacking of grass tufts when a new note sounded in my ear. A higher, more urgent note. A small wasp hovered a moment before me. Then the lower note of danger; and a fly with green and bronzed eyes touched the shin-bone of my left leg.

And what a fly! In outline it was almost an equilateral triangle, with innocent-looking black wings, laced with gold; and a yellow-brown body touched also with black. Its battery of eyes had the glaze of bright pottery in the windows of seaside shops. Bending down, heedless of the ordinary riff-raff of black flies clustering about my face and neck, I observed that the stranger had a most fearsome beak or proboscis, the end of which was being moved delicately, as though in adjustment of its assembly of cutting edges.

I recognized it then, from an article in the *Stockbreeder*. It was a warble fly. It laid its eggs on the shins of bullocks; they hatched to grubs, which after making a year's tour of the animal's body, settled into lumps on the skin of the beast's back, white maggots about to eat their way out and emerge as warble flies to start another cycle of their racial life in the bullock.

I watched the tremulous cutting edges about to test my skin, ready to smudge the fly out of existence, when with a shrill whine and slight shadow a sand-wasp shot aslant the curved white willow handle of the mattock. I heard the slight click of jaws as the warble fly was snatched from its grasp on the sun-bleached hairs of my forearm. Wasp and warble fly twirled in the dust, a wild dance; ended by first one wing of the warble being torn off, then the other. Bending over the feeble struggle which made to quiver one thin, dry blade of grass, I watched the wasp sawing off, with its mandibles, the head of the fly. Soon the group of faceted eyes, each multi-lensed, each in marvellous adjustment, was off. What the wasp took from the body I don't

know, but whatever it wanted for fodder for its young was ripped out and borne away in instant flight—a whining gleam, a line of flight drawn straight into the air and curving away to invisibility over the top of the hawthorn hedge.

After that, the sight of Hawker Fury planes passing overhead in pupil formation was a tame mechanical thing. Even the dark green bomber with retractable under-carriage overtaking them was a poor imitation of what I had just seen. There was a faster pursuit monoplane to be seen occasionally in the air flying at more than 300 m.p.h.; but it seemed to me to be centuries, cycles of centuries, whole geological ages behind the conception of my solitary sand-wasp.

When the tenders for the cottages came in, I was appalled. One was for £950; the other for £620 15s. The lower was about double what I had imagined it to be.

One of the conditions of the grant was that the value of cottages, when remade, must not exceed £250 each. Presuming them to be worth £200, a further £620 would make them worth £820. I hastened to see the architect.

He said I had paid, in his opinion, about £100 too much for them in the first place. Frankly, they were rubbish. He suggested cuts and revisions. The eastern dormer windows to go. The expensive builder not to be asked to tender. He would ask all the smaller local builders. He would draw another plan and specification. The District Council met monthly; the next meeting was on June the 30th, in ten days' time. I reminded him that one of the conditions of the grant was that details of costs must be sent in. Otherwise, I said, a month would be missed.

The architect worked quickly. I had stipulated that £450 must be the top limit. When the tenders came in, the lowest was £506. The bathroom had been cut out, but not the single extra small room above the wash-house. The maximum possible grant was £300 for the three cottages, though it was doubtful if the Wordingham R.D.C. would vote for the maximum amount, despite its being recoverable from the Ministry of Health. It would be the first application before them; something new. Inevitably there would be shaken heads, which

would mean a compromise, and perhaps £60 a cottage; or no grant at all. Weeds grow in the minds of men before they arise in a countryside.

On paper I worked out the totals of the rebuilding, supposing the lowest tender were accepted. £506 plus architect's fee £30, electric light by Sam £14; total £550. It was too much. I told architect and builder that I would give my answer after the decision of the R.D.C. on June the 30th.

On the 31st the architect, in reply to my telephone call, reported that the Council had not considered the application, because a specification of detailed costs had not been submitted. I was not surprised, because it was in line with most other things. Next meeting, July the 30th.

Meanwhile, the cottage for Loetitia and the family needed attention. On July the 1st Sam and I went to see the old gardener. It was a week after Midsummer Day, when Commander Trelawney had undertaken to give me possession of the 'farm-house'.

'We must be firm,' I said to Sam; 'everything depends on our being firm.'

'Yes,' replied Sam, whose black beard was now six inches long, and very bushy.

'We must stand up to the old woman, Sam!'

'Ah,' said Sam.

The flint and brick cottage looked peaceful and desirable, with its low roof and walls of flint and brick, its bushes of lavender and rosemary growing under the latticed windows, its well of weathered brick, with windlass, and old oak buckets on chains.

'This is where you will put your electric pump,' I was telling Sam, when, exactly as a year before, a door opened, the cudgel was brandished, and the gruff voice cried, 'Be off! Thieves, Robbers, Saucy Devils! Arabs!'—this last probably caused by Sam's beard.

We left at once, and went to see the old gardener, who was pottering about in the grounds of the Castle. I told him that he had lived in my cottage for nearly a year by an act of grace, rent free, and now the time had come for him to retire gracefully to some other place. As he had for many years received £2 a week

for looking after the gardens while the Castle was empty, and was indeed still receiving this sum, in addition to the Old Age Pension, for himself and his wife, he could not say that he was hardly treated. But he would not listen. He had lived in the cottage for twenty years, and there he would stay. No-one could turn him out. Certainly no jumped-up foreigner like myself, he cried in a quavery voice. 'Well,' I said, 'my family of five children must have a home at Michaelmas, and really you have no right to live here, rent free, when you have three pounds a week coming in. How can we farm, if we have no home?'

'I don't care what you or anyone does,' he replied. 'Here I am and here I stay. Not even the King himself can turn me out!'

Only by going to law, by having the old man ejected, could I live in the cottage. I did not want to do that. I wrote to Commander Trelawney, telling him that I thought he should know that the cottage was not yet vacated, and that I felt sure that he would want to know this fact. He replied that he had tried to find a cottage for the old fellow, but so far without success. He found it all very worrying, and hardly knew what to do about it.

The weeks went by. We got no further. Time was getting short. Where could the family go?

There was only one thing to do. The family must come to the three condemned cottages. But if they did, there would be no Government grant for the rebuilding. The grant was only for cottages to be occupied by labourers, for a space of twenty years after the reconditioning.

In the morning, I talked it over with Sam. He was optimistic. Why couldn't we do the building for half the money a builder would charge? We had two workmen helping us make the roads. Why not use them, and buy our own wood, bricks, lime to mix mortar in the second-hand concrete mixer we had recently bought? We had our own sand-pit on the Castle Hills.

It would mean the abandonment of the scheme to complete the roads, concrete yards and drains, pigs'-houses, and renovated cow-house, before Michaelmas, when we took over the farm. Once we had the farm-work, there would be little or no time for such things. Sam was confident that we could rebuild

the cottages at an economic price. I had doubts; but time was beginning to press upon me. And what would they cost—£500? Mr. Bly, the builder, had assured me that nobody could do it for less than that. If they cost £500, I said to Sam, then we would be short of capital to buy stock and implements. I had to make a decision quickly, whether to forgo the possible grant in a month's time and start building at once; or to have the old man ejected by applying to the County Court judge. In the morning I went to consult a local lawyer, a young man of few words and quick action, and he advised me that as Commander Trelawney was my tenant, at the nominal rent, it was up to him to get rid of his old servant. In the afternoon I went to see the architect, and told him I must forgo the application for a grant. He asked ten guineas for the work on his plans and I gave him a cheque.

Chapter Seventeen

I ENCOUNTER MANY DIFFICULTIES



Pine Tree Camp was pleasantly situated at the edge of Castle Wood, with a view down over the river and meadows, and then to the marshes and the North Sea. The caravan stood beside the lightning-splintered stump of a pine, under the shade of a sycamore tree; Sam's tent was a hundred yards away. By day a hot wind was always moving seawards from the land; always the wind was rustling the sycamore leaves overhead, and singing through the pines.

One night as we walked up from the village, lightning flashed and lit the trees, and the reverberations of thunder rolled around the hills. It was a circular-travelling tempest, and the intervals between each running jagged violet flash and the consequent thunder-clap told me it was about two miles off. Any moment, as we walked up the hill, I expected a rush of rain; but though the flashes came nearer, no rain fell. On the hill top we stood and watched the play of light, which gradually ringed around the boundaries of the farm. It was a curious and pleasant sensation, standing in the midst of the jagging light. Each flash seemed to turn the trees to fossilized growths. It was a magnificent storm, continuing, with intervals, throughout the night.

I lay in bed, feeling easier as I watched the lightning illuminating the pine-tree tops through the open door of the caravan, and hoping for the climax of a great crash of rain to fall on the roof. So I fell asleep, to be awakened by Sam getting the breakfast. We were having a week away from the quarry, having lent our two men to the bailiff of the farm, for the haysel. We let the bailiff use the green trailer, as he was short of carts; and when it was returned the towing bar was bent, probably by

being struck against one of the few remaining gateposts. As a matter of course nothing was said about it being bent, much less an offer to have it straightened.

During the week Sam worked on the brakes, the idea being to improve them as brakes and also to get rid of the shuddering noise. On the treadle lathe—the original lathe of the Cobbold Bros. factory—he turned bronze bearings for the transverse brake rods. He fitted them meticulously, as though they were engine bearings of a Schneider Trophy seaplane. Afterwards he balanced the brakes. On the sixth day of his labour we took the lorry on the road. The trumpeting note remained; if anything, it was more piercing, almost a pure musical note. So Sam took it to the garage where the engine had been taken down, and more work was done on the brakes; with the same result.

I required the brakes to be efficient, because shortly I was going on a journey to the Romney Marsh country with the lorry, to fetch a friend who had worked with me as secretary for the past six years. I was going to bring her furniture, for it was planned that she should have the cottage then occupied by Mrs. Hammet, adjoining the cottage held by Napoleon. Mrs. Hammet would move into one of the reconditioned Bugg cottages.

I left the camp one July evening, and at first drove slowly, prepared for a long and tedious journey; but soon I was doing an easy 30 m.p.h., the maximum allowed by law. What a difference between the lorry empty, and loaded with two cubic yards of stones! It felt light on the throttle, and after the first town, on a straight length of road towards Breckford, I took it up to 35 m.p.h., and then to 40. It began to vibrate at that speed, and I slowed down to 35, lest the pistons 'take-up' again. At Breckford I had some bread and cheese and beer in the pub where I had met Miss Gunton, and went on happily, looking forward to crossing the Thames at Gravesend ferry early next morning, and to seeing Ann about midday.

Just before ten o'clock—'closing time'—I stopped at a little pub for another pint, feeling myself to be tough and slightly mysterious in my overalls, talking in the bar to the landlord about farming. The farm always seemed more desirable, the farther I got from it. But when we had proper food, perhaps it would be better. Dates and brown bread and cheese, with an

occasional egg and bacon, were not enough for the hard work being done by day, and the writing in the evening. Yes, Ann's catering would put things right.

I had a third pint, standing drinks all round and proposing a toast of, Success to Farming! I was talking idealistically about the new England which was in the making; and the good fellows, ploughmen and labourers, responded as one man: it was wonderful what enthusiasm accompanied by a free pint of beer would do. 'Good night, boys,' and I was running out to the lorry, hopping in, and soon driving down the road, right foot pressing accelerator and reaching 45 m.p.h. But caution, and the pressure of beer, made me stop.

At 11.15 p.m., having done seventy-six miles by the speedometer, I pulled into a bay, beside heaps of gravel and barrels of bitumen, and switching off engine and lights, climbed into the back and lay down on a heap of meal-sacks. By the torchlight I looked at the map, and reckoned I was near Halstead, in Essex. Then I took off my shoes, wrapped myself in a flea-bag, and tried to sleep.

It was not cold but the sacks were lumpy, I was excited, eager for morning light, and so sleep did not come. I dozed and turned over, the smell of pig-meal about my nose, the luminous hands of my wristlet watch pointing to 2 a.m., 3 a.m., 4 a.m., 4.55 a.m., then after what seemed a long period, it was 5.5 a.m. I had slept for ten minutes.

Would the engine start easily? It was a tricky carburettor, and needed full throttle and full choke while the four cylinders were charged; then with ignition retarded, switch on and choke half-open, the handle was swung. It fired at once; and soon I was on the road to Chelmsford, and breakfast with hot coffee and eggs and bacon in a transport drivers' shelter.

To Tilbury at 7.15 a.m., driving on to the ferry, and watching the widening ship-bearing river swirling with the gold of the sun, seagulls flying and a Greenwich barge with brown close-hauled sails tacking down with the tide. On land again, through Gravesend and Chatham, and into the heart of pastoral Kent, with its oast-houses, orchards, and weedy pastures.

Two hours later, I was telling Ann about the difficulties of the present, offsetting these with descriptions of the marshes (which

I had walked on only once with Sam), the tasty crabs hawked round the village (which we had not yet eaten), the cockles, and the blue boat sailing to the Ternery sandhills (the boat being still half-sunk in the river).

Ann's sister next door had mumps, but Ann had been careful not to go near her, she said: and the doubtful period of quarantine was over for her. I questioned her about this, and she assured me it was correct. 'If you get mumps, and give it to Sam and myself, our whole scheme may be wrecked.' Ann said she had taken every precaution, and the doctor had declared she was now free.

It was fine to lie on the lawn, the eye-sockets hot and yellowed in the ardent sun. A Dartford warbler was nesting in her hedge. After a cup of China tea, I read an article I had written for the *Daily Express*—another £12 towards the farm—and fell contentedly asleep.

At twilight next day we arrived at the Camp, the entire journey taking twenty-five gallons which, at 1s. 5½d. a gallon, cost £1 18s. 6d. That night it rained hard and the rain dripped through the canvas of the caravan annexe. The canvas of the top was new, remade by a tentmaker before leaving Devon. 'Isn't there anyone in England who can do a decent job?' I shouted, as in pyjamas I struggled with the wind-flapping canvas. All the contents of the annexe, including Ann's bed, got wet. In the morning she said she felt queer, with a headache. Her neck looked swollen. She had mumps.

While I had been away, the Cement Marketing Board had sent down a man to show Sam how to make concrete roads through the yards. Sam had made a plan of the drains, after taking levels. We had made a heap of about a hundred tons of gravel near the stables, and some of this was used for the work. Sam's concrete slabs looked very nice when I returned, examining them in the moonlight; but then a fearful thought struck me—perhaps the outfall of the drains, into the pond, was below the level of the winter river; and it was during the winter rains that they would be in use. Actually this thought was baseless: Sam's drainage system was properly planned and made, and would last for hundreds of years.

Chapter Eighteen

MY MANAGER DEPARTS



'I'd like to help you,' said Mr. Bly the builder. 'I'm a stranger misself in these parts. I'll let you have what labour you require at cost price to me plus 10 per cent, and all materials at cost plus 10 per cent. You can see me books and invoices any time you like. I'm starting fresh here, like you, and I'll do it for an advert, as you say you're an author.'

'But will you mind if we employ our own labour, in part?'

'Nothing to do with me what you do. I'm not hard oop for work, in fact, I've just got a contract to build a dozen houses. I can use all my labour, don't you worry about that! You can employ what men you like of your own.'

'Thank you. And you won't be offended if we buy some of our materials elsewhere? Second-hand bricks, for example?'

'Why should I care what you do? It's oop to you. Only you won't get materials any cheaper than you can get them from me. I buy in bulk.'

'Thank you. It's a great help, and I'm glad I met you.'

The conversation took place in Pine Tree Camp. At last we were about to begin the rebuilding of a part of England, contrary to all economic rectitude. £300 or more of our precious capital at least would go into the Bugg Cottages, the rents of which would not yield a 'proper' return. To hell with money, I would work and do a proper job, I didn't want any reward.

The next day our picks broke into the rotten flint walls of the Bugg House, as we called it, tearing down cracked and sagging ceilings, worm-eaten beams and rafters, disturbing the dust, the soot, the decayed rats' nests and sparrows' nests, of over two centuries. I learned the meaning of the term, *rotten fabric*. There

was not a piece of wood in the roofs which was not bored and re-bored by the wood-worm, made brittle so that it broke easily, with much dust falling from the break. And the flint walls, where they bulged, were as bad. They crumbled like old dried cake. We took away load after load of rubbish, spreading it on the farm roads for foundations. Our hair, eyes, nostrils, ears, all our clothes, were filled with the dusty corruption of past life. Sam clipped his beard, for it was full of spiders' webs and other fragments. At last only the shell of the cottages was left, and we could begin.

We had the services of a bricklayer, a labourer, and a joiner or carpenter from Mr. Bly. By the beginning of August, it was obvious we needed more help, so we engaged two more bricklayers. With wages being paid out at the rate of £5 a day, we could not afford any holding up of the work; but owing to our inexperience, the work was constantly being held up for lack of this or that material. Usually I was told of the need for more nails, or purlins, or cills, or rafters, or lintels, or door jambs, or battens—all unknown things—only when they were actually needed. I learned that lime should be slaked off days before being used, otherwise it was liable to 'blow', to cause bubbles in the mortar; and that a sieve was called a riddle. I would start out one morning with the lorry to the flint pit with two men, to get on with the roads, and stop a moment to look at the work on the cottages, and find out from Sam, working on the roof, that more bricks were urgently needed. Why didn't you realize it before you ran out, I cried, and dashed to the telephone to order more, and find out they would take at least two days. Meanwhile the two men waited in the idle lorry. Coming out of the telephone box, the postman would give me the morning's post, and I would find a proof required immediate correction and that parts of the new book, in print, needed revision, by return if possible. That must wait until the night. I must fetch eight hundred old bricks from the dump five miles away, otherwise the bricklayers would have nothing to do after midday.

Poor Ann spent a miserable six weeks in her tent among the pine-trees. I was the cook now, and her food was pushed to her at the end of a long pole. Afterwards a hook on the pole drew

cup and plate towards a disinfected wash-bowl. The food was boiled rabbits, eggs, milk, tea, and bread and butter, with an occasional lettuce.

Cottage work was slow; and lacking a proper foreman, the men worked without proper stimulus. During this time I made two journeys to Devon with the lorry to fetch boxes of books, furniture, etc., to save the higher cost of removal by a furniture van. The second time I took Ann and Windles, who was spending his holiday from school with us. For the return journey I had ordered a second new trailer to be made—convertible to farm-cart to hold two tons—and this was to be drawn behind the lorry, loaded up. We had not gone fifteen miles when one tyre caught fire, by rubbing against the wooden body, owing to the weak and exhausted springs; and the other wheel fell off going down a hill. We had to abandon the trailer, with its contents, by the roadside in Somerset. In one of the abandoned boxes were first editions; and when the box eventually came up by train, the books were ruined by the acid of an accumulator having spilt over them during the salvage operations. There was a bound set of the original *Pickwick Papers* destroyed among them.

The journey certainly was not monotonous. The off-hind wheel of the lorry punctured near Breckford. Just before midnight I felt the wheel bumping, and stopped by the roadside. Looking for the jack to lift up the four-ton mass, and so to fit the spare wheel, I found a jack belonging to a Baby Austin Seven car. This jack was part of the 'proper tool equipment' stipulated in the original sale agreement. Its slender stem could not lift such a weight. I lay under the lorry for an hour, trying to lift it, and eventually crawled out wet with sweat and shouting with such rage and misery that a man from a near-by cottage came out, coat over nightshirt, and asked whatever was the meaning of the terrible language. I showed him the idiotic little jack, and then pointed to the mass it was supposed to lift up; while apologizing for the swearing, and also for having awakened him; and was hoping that he would give me some advice about how to get a jack at that time of night, but instead he gave me a lecture on the virtues of Restraint and Patience, after which he went back to bed. In the meantime Ann and

Windles had walked into a near-by village and had awakened a garage proprietor, who came out with a car and a proper jack, and soon had the spare wheel in place.

On my return to Creek, I found things had not gone altogether easily there. The youngest bricklayer had refused to lay tiles with Sam, declaring that Sam was not a Union man. So Sam had got down from the ladder. The tiles were ill-laid; the bitumen felt under them broken in many places by the toes of the tile-layer. The ceilings underneath were giving trouble too. Many dozens of sections of plaster-board, each three feet by three feet, had been ordered for the ceilings to save the cost of nailing thousands of wooden laths to the rafters. The idea was to nail these sections to the rafters, then 'skim' them with plaster, making a quick ceiling. When we came to nail them, I found that the rafters had been put up fifteen inches apart, instead of eighteen inches. So every square yard of plaster-board had to be specially measured, cut, and fitted. The wastage was one-sixth; the labour cost was trebled. It took a long time to get the ceilings up that way. September passed; October came and still the Bugg Houses were a chaos of scaffolding, planks, pails, heaps of trodden sand, mortar, bricks, all the litter of building. October the 11th, Old Michaelmas Day, the day for our taking over the farm, arrived. I had planned to have a tractor by then, and to get on right away with autumn ploughing. I had planned to have the double cottages ready, made into one farmhouse, to have a blazing open-hearth fire to welcome the children from Devon. By Michaelmas all the reconstruction work was to have been done—and here I was, hardly started.

Sam was leaving. For some time he had been answering advertisements in the *Daily Telegraph* and early in November he packed up, to go to a job in a Midland factory. I felt remorse that he had come so far, for so little, and that I had let him down; and he felt that he was forsaking the farm in its hardest period. We shook hands, and wished each other luck. He got into a car he had hired, and drove away.

A month or two later and he was lying in a hospital, after an operation for mastoid. He developed double pneumonia and pleurisy; and if Loetitia had not gone to him, he would probably have died. Only later, when he had recovered, did I learn

that almost all of the time at Creek the poor chap had suffered from constant headaches.

The leaves were falling, the early winter gales swaying the pines, fluttering Sam's faded empty tent among the trees. Rain lashed on the caravan roof at night. The workmen, who would be on the dole when the job was finished, cycled through the dim and windy morning light to the cottages; the seas broke wild over the marshes, and not a furrow driven in the sodden fields.

The weather became bitter and the east wind, straight over the North Sea from polar regions, cut like glass. It was too cold up there on the hill, so Ann and I decided to move down into the granary. The roof was broken, and the water poured on the furniture stored on the upper floor. Apparently the repairs were now to be the subject of arbitration. I patched the roof somehow so that the bad places only dripped water. I had brought from Devon an old anthracite stove, and fixed pipes up through the floor and the roof. The doors of the granary were rotten, and fallen from the door-posts. I propped them and pivoted them on bricks, and stuffed the holes with sacks. I didn't like to get any repairs done, lest I prejudice my claim for dilapidations. The east wind drove in raspingly. It was dark in the granary, and the oil lamp had to be lit all day, if one wanted to write, or, indeed, to see. The stove was a slow combustion stove, and small: it gave little warmth. But what warmth it gave brought several bats out of hibernation. Sometimes as I wrote at night, two or three would be fluttering round my head. It was amazing how many queen wasps were in the granary. I killed more than two hundred while I lived there. Fortunately there were no rats. These, I learned later, were all busy in the corn stacks of the old tenant. It was my obligation to thresh out those stacks for him; but how, or when, I did not know.

Meanwhile Loetitia in Devon was lodging in a cottage with the children's old nurse. I had made a last journey with the lorry, and loaded it up with the help of Ann, Loetitia and another woman friend. One man and three women; and all the

hamlet children came to draw the little trolley wagon Sam had made out of an old door and a pair of iron wheels and axle found in the river. Dozens of boxes of books, tea-chests each weighing over a hundredweight. Somehow they were lugged and pulled and slidden into the lorry, each one numbered and its contents noted according to an elaborate plan I had sent Loetitia. For the damp and dark granary was to be my reference library, as well as a home, workshop, and furniture store.

I was overtired, and impatient. I couldn't lift heavy weights easily; but somehow it was loaded, and I set off again with Ann. But a lot was left behind, and in the end I had to hire a carrier. I had tried to do too much—common error of the amateur.

Continually the question nagged at my mind: When would the four small boys, with their mother and sister, be able to live in their new home? They must be here for Christmas. If the cottages were not finished by then, they must come to the granary. Meanwhile I longed to have them all with me; and, however depressed I felt at times, I knew it was right that the venture should go on. Those boys were part of a New England, and as for the idea of hardship, why, living in the granary was paradise compared to the barns I would never forget—those broken billets of Flanders and the Somme. The farm must go on; it was my job. I would make it a success.

PART THREE: PREPARATION

Chapter Nineteen

I AM A MELANCHOLY FARMER



On Old Michaelmas Day 1937 I became a farmer. At noon on that day the bankrupt tenant went out, and I was the ingoing man. At one minute past noon, I was the occupier of my own farm of 235 acres.

The first day of my farming life was fine and sunny, yet ragged with wind and north-west cloud. I decided that the thing to do was to walk round the boundaries. Oh, the thistles of the past harvest! The steep field called Hilly Piece had been like a silver lake with the massed cardoons among the stunted barley. Four or five coombe of mouse-ear barley an acre was all it had yielded, the labourers reckoned. Years ago, it had produced fourteen or fifteen. I told myself it would grow sixteen sacks, as I hastened across the stubble field. It was not a pleasing sight—thick mats of weeds—crab-grass, creeping buttercup, grey-brown thistle stubs, silverweed, spurrey. Stooping down, I saw many small round dark seeds—charlock. Here were the fruits of years of neglect. I felt like a soldier before zero hour. It was all a bit scaring. I had no men, no implements, no horses, no stock; and I did not know where to get them. I hurried on, thinking of the work to be done on the rebuilding of cottages in the village below, before I had a home.

The distant sea was dark blue, very cold-looking, scored with white lines where waves broke on sandbars. Some sandbanks were above the sea, and dotted minutely. There the geese were resting, waiting for the dusk before coming inland to feed. I

walked faster, trying not to think of all the things to be done before the farm was in heart again. I knew that too much thought, or rather rumination, was the enemy of action.

As I walked across the stubble, with its two or three cut thistle-stalks to every emaciated stalk of barley, I thought that I must buy a tractor soon. The demonstrator would show me how to use it. I must remember to write for particulars of that special lightweight tractor with hydraulically lifted implements. I had read that it was the very thing to plough steep land.

But perhaps I ought to get a caterpillar tractor after all? A caterpillar might drag a three-furrow plough up there; but no, the farm couldn't support a large tractor. And how deep should the furrow be ploughed? Or should I have horses, costing anything from £15 for aged beasts to £60 for fine five-year-olds? Eighty acres to be ploughed—and all good farmers were now getting their autumn ploughing done.

I hurried through a wood, one of the fine pheasant woods I had told my friends about. It was a honeycomb of rabbit warrens; hundreds of rabbits. Farming was a business; a farmer was fortunate if he got 5 per cent return from his capital each year. With say £2,000 as capital, eventually, if I wrote a successful book, that meant £100 profit a year. Two horses badly bought, one field wrongly done, five cows getting disease, any one of a score of things like that, and no profit. A dozen mistakes, a bad season following a bad season—and no capital remaining.

Horse-dealers were notoriously sharp people to deal with. 'Greasy heel' I could easily detect, since all the summer a mare with her foal had been grazing on the Castle Hills. The mare's near hind fetlock had been a swelled and stinking mass of pus and flies. We felt sick whenever the wind blew towards us from the poor creature. No-one seemed to care. The farmer had come only occasionally to the farm, to collect eggs. Obviously he had lost heart.

Horses were liable to have things the matter with them like bog spavin, blood spavin, bone spavin (wish I hadn't ragged about during that 1916 Transport Course at Belton Park, Grantham, but listened more attentively to the staff-sergeant's lectures), splints, thrush, pole-evil, anthrax. Perhaps a tractor with spiked wheels and also rubber wheels, to pull the tumbrils

I'd ordered from a dealer. But first, the cottages must be finished.

The iceberg wind from across the North Sea blew over the field. I buttoned my coat and turned inland to the fourteen-acre field of roots, which I had to buy from the old tenant, at valuation. There were ten acres of Mangolds, four of Swede. Valuation day was fixed for October the 21st. Mangolds were for sheep and cows, I thought vaguely. I ought to get some cows. How did one buy them, other than ignorantly? I must find a good dealer.

But one ought to be wary of dealers. Most of them were rogues, so they said in the village.

And where could I get some sheep? What was it the old steward of the farm had said to me. 'You can't farm light land wi'out a ewe flock.' Sheep trod the light land tight, and manured it as they fed on the roots. Thus two jobs were done together; feeding sheep and feeding next year's corn. It was ingenious; but where could I get sheep? And what sort of sheep? And could I afford a shepherd, on such a small farm? If only I could remember the *Stockbreeder* articles I'd cut out and got Sam to file. And where were the articles? And all the catalogues? Somewhere in one of the boxes in the granary, nailed down.

A man in the pub had said, with quiet authority, 'You ought to buy crones.' I had a vague idea a crone was a sort of witch living in a wood; but of course it must be an old ewe. (I learned later that a crone was a ewe with broken front teeth, therefore useless for gnawing Swedes.) Then someone else had said that Strawless had once bought a lot of old ewes. Apparently on arrival they could scarcely walk up the hill, and when their lambs came, they had no milk for them. Most of the skins of that little lot had been hanging on the beam of the hovel: future rugs: or bluebottles' paradise. 'Best to buy hoggets,' said someone else.

On my walk I saw no pheasants: nor did I expect to see any, since Mr. Strawless's trustees' sporting tenant had come with half a dozen guns four or five times in the first ten days of October, and shot them all.

It took two hours to get round the fields, on my first day as a farmer. I returned, weary and temporarily dispirited; my feet cold and wet, jacket and flannel trousers covered with burrs, a

hundred tangled thoughts in my head, to the granary which was my temporary home. What a fool they must think me in the village! At least I hadn't got my photograph into the *Daily Herald* or *News-Chronicle*, with perhaps questions in the House of Commons, about a hard-hearted landlord turning out poor old white whiskered Hodge in the evening of his life. With irony I thought of the truth of this modern version of hard-hearted landlordism: the wicked capitalist living in damp, dark, cold, bat-fluttering, queen-wasp-buzzing, door-fallen, one-window'd granary, while poor old Hodge drew £3 for himself and wife, and lived rent and rate free.

Ann had a cup of tea waiting for me, as I slumped into the arm-chair before the stove. Soon my spirits rose. The stove was well alight, and giving a welcome red glow. The pipe went up through the floor, and warmed the loft above, where the furniture was stored. The granary floor was of uneven, worn brick. There was a carpenter's bench, with tool racks, a lathe, while tea-chests of books stood round the walls. A half-wild cat had made its home here, after many shadowy glidings-away when called or looked at. Now it was nearly tame, and brought us a dead rat on the mat by the stove some mornings.

Except when the east wind blew straight through the rotten, sack-stuffed doors, it wasn't too bad a place to live in. When it rained, the broken roof dripped in a dozen places; but various pots and pails usually collected the water. Sleet, however, drove through the tiles, and covered everything; and the wind flapped the papers on my table. Ann could not bear the cold; her face often was set and white. The weeks went on, and it seemed that the cottages would never be finished. The workmen were making a job for themselves, of course; but I could do nothing about it; except write half the night, to pay the wages.

Chapter Twenty

I FIND A STEWARD, AND BECOME A REBEL



One evening as I was sitting in the arm-chair, there came a hesitant knock on the door. Opening it—a tricky job, as one end was pivoted on three bricks, and liable to crash over if the weight of the door were not first taken on my left boot—I saw a man and a dog standing there. I recognized him as the horse-man who had worked under the old tenant. I had spoken to him sometimes. He said he wanted to talk to me. I asked him in and he came in, and stood there cap in hand, while his aged terrier dog, with tail frivolously curled over its back, at once began to sniff and peer for rats. Then it met the cat, and waved its curly tail. ‘Spot, come here,’ said the horse-man. ‘It’s all right,’ I said. Cat and dog were friends, and ignored one another. ‘Well,’ said the visitor, ‘I’ve been a-talking with Father, and we don’t want to see you in no muddle.’ With hesitation he offered to help me, if I would like him to. He said he had been asked to go to another farm, so had Father, but he was willing to try me if I wanted him. Though neither he nor Father might suit me, he knew. They didn’t know only what was usually done in the district, he said. I saw he was a bit apprehensive of the electric milking machine I had once told him about, before I had learned that bringing in the electric light would cost over £200 before it reached the first building. ‘Father’s a good man, I don’t say it because I’m his son. Good work is good work whoever does it. He can do anything, sheep, pigs, bullocks, thatch, he can do anything.’ He himself was a teamsman, and used to ‘hard graft’. Hard graft: hard work. I asked him if he would be the farm’s bailiff. After hesitation, he said he would

try the job. As teamsman, he would be rising at 5.30 on a winter's morning to feed the horses, but he would do bailiff extra for the same money. 'I won't see you in a muddle,' he said earnestly, while the aged glister-eyed terrier gave a raucous bark and stared up at my face. Finding no rats, his eager nature had smelled rabbit cooking in the pot.

'Well, Bob,' I said, 'thank you for coming.'

'Good night,' he said.

When he had gone, I danced with Ann to a tune from the portable radio, and opened a bottle of sherry. I had found my man Friday!

The night before the auction of the old tenant's Live and Dead Stock, my new steward and I walked round the rows of implements, past the laid-out lots of horse collars, chains, bins, barrels, rakes, ladders, carts and other gear. The nettles along the lower farm road, which Sam and I had made up in the summer, had been cut the day before. A new acquaintance who owned the village Rag, Bone, and Scrap Metal store accompanied us along the rows of implements. It was my idea that he should buy for me—if I were seen bidding, I might be 'run' by someone interested in Strawless's debts, suggested the new steward.

The steward and I decided on the prices he should bid for the various items we required. On a catalogue I wrote down the sums he was asked not to exceed. If the bidding went above them, I said, I would do my own bidding if necessary. I thought this was clear, and returned to the granary, being behind with my writing. Also I had to examine and compare prices of new implements in the catalogues.

While I was working, a black car stopped outside the granary. The chauffeur opened the door, and a woman got out, and said she was Lady Sunne, and having read my articles, she had found the spirit of them was so creatively in accord with what she and her friends believed, that she had come to beg me to consider joining their movement. My visitor, who said her people had been Norfolk for generations, was so fervent that I felt laggingly ungracious in my reply that I was useless for any big creative effort: an exhausted man. 'Oh, but we do so need *help!*' she cried, 'the country *needs* all men of good will, the

land neglected, labourers leaving the land, unemployment a national disgrace. The old parties are tired, and useless. I know! I used to be chairman of the Conservative Party, but they madened me, they just talked, they never *did* anything. Won't you help?' Then looking at me straightly, 'I believe I've found the man we're looking for!'

I thought of the undone cottages, the departure of Sam, the capital I must earn by overwork, continual work, all day, half the night, never stopping, if the farm was to be a success. Of what use would I be as a speaker, leaving the granary with a divided personality, torn by doubts and fears of the task I had assumed so irrationally, and even then, was continuing in such an irregular manner.

'Won't you give us your help?' asked Lady Sunne, smiling, her head on one side expectantly.

Every reason was against my taking on more work. We smiled at one another.

'May I write and tell you?'

'Do!'

That night, while the bats were flitting about the wooden joists of the granary ceiling—one bat lived in the keyhole of the great old wooden lock—and owls were hooting outside on the stable roof, I read the pamphlets Lady Sunne had left with me. The fundamental spirit of a new, clean, healthy, mentally fearless Britain was so similar to the theme of the book about Maddison the ex-soldier, which had taken ten lonely years to begin and finish, that I felt a new hope and confidence arising in me. I was no longer alone in the ideas which burned in my brain.

I was used to putting more into life than I took out of it, despite superficial criticisms of selfishness made by idle or half-idle people. I would put more into farming than I would get out of it; and be called a fool by idlers and grabbers, who got more out of life than they were prepared to give. Personal loss would come if it were known I had joined this political party: but that was nothing. The only thing that worried me, was, Could I be of use, as I was? Britain needed new leadership, otherwise the future would hold only disaster. The present

system was ruining the land and the people—and they were Britain. The present system was a price-cutting, get-profit-anywhere-anyhow system made by townsmen, which cared little or nothing for the soil and the people. A nation that neglected its soil, neglected its soul; and its people would perish.

‘The alternatives of our age are heroism or oblivion.’

We came from the soil, the earth that bore and shaped us; we returned to the earth, after each man his journey. That night I wrote to Lady Sunne, requesting the honour of membership of her party.

Chapter Twenty-one

I BUY A PLOUGH



At the auction next day I was nervous. Had someone marked me down as a mug, to be 'run', as the steward had suggested? There were some hard faces among the straggling press of men clustering round Mr. Stubberfield. My secret buyer, a smart new neck-cloth round his neck, winked and nodded to me many times. Wasn't he giving the game away, I wondered. Bob had told me that the group of 'speculators', who having bought the adjoining land once farmed by Strawless, had been prevented by the Town Planning Act from selling building plots, wanted many of the implements for their own farming venture. I must be careful.

The bidding started. We moved from the cheap lots of old iron, half-rotten wood, barrels, and wire-netting. We came to the first item I had marked to be bought. My buyer bought it. We moved on. The next item was not on my list; but my buyer bought it. For himself, I wondered? He bought the next item, also unmarked on my list. Whatever was he doing? After several more lots had fallen to him, I drew him aside. He was partly deaf, and I had to shout. Yes, he said, he had bought them all for me.

When we came to the harness—'Six sets of thill gears'—the gent from Rag and Bone dump did not buy the set I had marked on his card. He bought all six. Then I found that, when the limit put on a horse-hoe had been passed, and I entered the bidding, he was raising my bid every time. This put ten shillings on the hoe.

At the end of the auction I found I had spent nearly £70. Bob had his familiar horse-hoe (£4), his one-furrow plough (£3 5s.),

I BUY A PLOUGH

sack-hoist (£1 4s.), reaper and binder (£8), the chaff-cutter already fixed in the barn (£12—the ‘speculators’ wanted this too), and other items. Afterwards I met the ‘speculator’ who had been bidding against me, causing some of the high prices. ‘Why didn’t you tell me you wanted those things,’ he asked. ‘I didn’t realize that you had a stooge buying for you, or of course I wouldn’t have gone against you. I’m new to farming, too; my name’s also Williamson.’

I had had the classic experience of a new farmer. I’d been ‘run’; but by my own mismanagement.

Chapter Twenty-two

LIFE IN A GRANARY



Though it was generally hard work and no play, yet sometimes we did go out, driving through unfamiliar dark lanes to a cinema in one or another of the local towns. Three times during that winter we went to the new political party meeting, with Lady Sunne and a few supporters. Lady Sunne had a car with a microphone beside a platform on the top of it. It was a strange feeling, addressing the stars and the flint and brick walls of almost empty squares and dead-end streets. I felt the hollowness of myself on those occasions; but always the fervour and enthusiasm of Lady Sunne was inspiring. She was so much in earnest; and yet we appeared to be getting nowhere. For that reason alone I determined to help her in what small limited way I could.

Ann and I were not the only living things in the granary. One evening, just as the candle flame was drawing up after lighting, something fell with a flop beside the wick and I looked up from the ledger and saw a large queen wasp, her wings burning, stinging the blue gas around the wick in a fury of pain and defence. Slowly the body relaxed from the last curve, the grease dulled the yellow bars, the wings spluttered as they burned, and life went out of the small passionate body. The candle-flame burned upright and steady, and I went on with my work.

Some time later, as I was writing, two mice ran over my feet, one following the other, over my shoes. The year before, when I had looked over the farm with Mr. Barkway, hundreds of rabbit skins were nailed on the beams overhead; now the nails were rusty, and some slightly furry. I watched one of the mice climbing methodically from nail to nail, gathering the scanty

grey hairs—for her winter nest. I hoped she was not making it in one of the boxes of first editions and manuscripts down below the stairs.

The river outside moved seawards silently, glimmering with stars and the wake of wildfowl when I went down to wash. After the first few weeks, the moorhens lost fear of me. One was lame, and used to hop so fast to the water when she saw me coming, that often she fell over. Later, she hid behind a clump of old nettles, and even preened herself as I scooped water in the bowl and washed my hands, only a few feet away.

The wasp lay an hour or more in the grease of the candle, unburned save for the wings. The body lay below the flame, subsiding with the wick. She was the seventeenth queen to perish in the granary, in one week.

Sometimes, as I wrote, minute showers of wood-dust, or frass, fell on the paper. Up above, the ceaseless tunnelling of the death-watch beetle went on. Occasionally I heard the grub's ticking—like a watch—seventeen or nineteen times usually, though it was hard to count. The grubs knocked with their heads, when thrusting out the frass from the holes. The beam was like a miniature rabbit-burrow in sand. Even the immense beams in the Great Barn, made from lengths of the masts of an old schooner, were riddled. I had three 40-gallon drums of creosote standing in the hovel, ready for treating all the woodwork of the buildings—one day.

Abruptly the candle guttered, the wick fell, the flame turned blue, and it was dark. I sat still, waiting for the opaque darkness to clarify to a deep blue dusk. Outside, waterfowl splashed and there was the low reedy noise of a wild duck. I saw a star flashing through a chink in the tiles. Could it be Betelgeuse in Orion, arising again, to tell of the coming of winter? For only yesterday, it seemed, I was lying in the lorry that night on the way to Gravesend ferry, and thinking of all that would be achieved before the winter stars arose again over the night horizon.

A pheasant grated as it flew away, up there on the hillside. What was disturbing him? Poachers? Surely not, with the leaves still on the trees. A fox? One had not been seen in North Norfolk for years, I was told. Yet I thought I had seen one, while camping among the pine-trees: a ruddy brown move-

ment, vanishing instantly. Or had it been a brown dog in the hedge? (The next year we found a fox's droppings, grey fur and splintered rabbit's bones and blue beetle wing-cases, on Hilly Piece: an old dog-fox, living solitary.)

The first hoodie crows appeared in the woods, having crossed the sea from the spruce forests of Norway. In the village they called the grey crow a Denchman, said to be a corruption of Danishman. Blue eyes and fair hair of many of the Norfolk children tell to-day that not all the Danish, German, and Dutch invaders of the past were killed on arrival.

The cunning old hoodie crow, the Denchman, sits on the sheep-bridge rails of the marshes and looks around him for food. He eats anything. Through glasses I saw one flapping after a small bird in the withered sea-lavender bushes growing above the mud guts. Perhaps it was a migrant robin or siskin, or one of the lesser wading birds which had been wounded by shot from some fowling-piece. I saw flapping dark wings and beak hammering down; then the Denchman was standing on its prey, pulling away beakfuls, and swallowing.

Many birds were arriving from across the sea. They came in twos and threes, and in little flights of straggling flocks. All of them flew a few feet above the waves. They were tired, some were exhausted. There was no following north-east wind to aid them. I watched the golden-crested wren, tiniest of all British birds save the fire-crest, come like a hesitant bumble bee and drop into the sandhills, its needle-beak gaping with thirst, its wings drooping with fatigue. Three yellow-grey owls, with short feather-tufts like stub-horns on their heads, flapped down soon afterwards. Near the dark ribs of the wreck on the Barrier Sand an owl pitched near me, beside a migrant wagtail, which showed no fear of the bird of prey. They had weariness in common.

Day after day of windless calm of sunlight, serene and warm, as though all life were suspended on the earth, save for the movement of wave and tide, and the fluttering and piping cries of wild birds.

Chapter Twenty-three

I LEARN MANY THINGS



The meadow which during the summer was covered by rushes, and also which was said to be the best grazing, was let to a village butcher for 10s. a week. In the old days this meadow was said to have fatted bullocks left on it, each with its round cast-iron bowl for a daily ration of linseed cake. It was a weekly letting; for I was going to pay away no more year's rent as 'disturbance'. Mr. Stubberfield had sent me a formal claim for a year's rent for 'disturbing' the farming activities of my late tenant, and an interesting document it was, too.

TO H. W. WILLIAMSON, ESQ., Creek, Norfolk.

AS TRUSTEE under a DEED OF ASSIGNMENT executed by Mr. S. Strawless, I hereby give you Notice that I claim Compensation under Section 12 of the Agricultural Holdings Act 1923 for the loss and expense incurred by me in quitting the Old Castle Farm situate in the parish of Creek in the County of Norfolk, namely as follows:

	£	s.	d.
1. Loss upon Sale of Implements of Husbandry ..	35	0	0
2. Loss upon Sale of 6 horses, 4 head of Neat Stock and 66 pigs	57	0	0
3. Loss upon Sale of Certain Fixtures	6	0	0
4. Expenses of preparing Claim for Compensation ..	4	0	0
	<hr/>		
	£102	0	0

CLAIM: One year's rent of Holding £100 0 0

Two or three times a week I set out with the lorry, and some ropes, and found my way to auction sales, sometimes as far as

fifty miles distant. Gradually I overcame my nervousness of being considered a mug or ignoramus, and if I wanted information I did not hesitate to ask for it. The procedure at the auctions was always the same. In a grass field near the buildings the lots would be laid out, beginning with heaps of old iron and wood, oil drums, broken hurdles, and sacks. Gradually the condition and value of the lots improved, ladders, bins, fowls' houses, and so to the implements, Double-breasted road Wagons on iron arms, Harvest Wagons, Four-wheeled Trolley on springs, Tumbrils, Corn Elevators, Three-wheeled iron Water-Carts, 12- or 18- or 23-coulter Disc Corn Drills, Grass Mowers, Hoes, etc. When the implements were sold, there was usually an interval for lunch, when one sought out the beer and sandwiches laid out on a trestle table in perhaps the cart hovel or other open shed. Afterwards, a handbell was swung by a man in a long overall cotton coat, and, followed by the auctioneer, we would go to the ring, where the horses were to be sold. After the horses, the cows and calves and pigs; and last of all, the hens.

Usually I came back with some implement or article the use of which I was not quite clear about; but Bob had told me what to 'go after', and usually I did not have any difficulty in finding it, and judging its condition. If I were in doubt, I would ask someone standing by, and invariably I got good advice.

But it was a cold-footed job, standing about in the bleak wind, with often a rushed, half-eaten breakfast left behind, to get there in time. At this period I used to have about a hundred letters a week, most of them inspired by the newspaper articles, from young men wanting to share my adventurous life. One or two came down, but after a day on the concrete mixer (for we snatched days on the 'slabs' between auctions) they went home again. They found me bleak as the weather; I had no inclination to discuss ideas with them, having my own fixed convictions about what was needed to alter the social fabric of Britain. Some of my visitants were theoretical Communists, full of praise for Russia; while I thought the Communist ideology was dated nineteenth century; I had ceased to feel enthusiastic about it ten years before. Anyhow, I wanted to get the farm in order; and had no time for debating.

After a while, getting used to the auctions, my diffidence about being able to compete with red-faced, solid-looking men began to leave me. I discovered that most of them were like myself, a bit apprehensive about being 'run'. Even the old-iron merchants, usually called diddecoys, because of their gipsy-like appearance, became my friends. They usually wore the same sort of clothes; black felt hats, dark trousers with a hint of the bell-bottom, and high-buttoning dark jackets. They came in old lorries, and were to be seen after the auction loading up masses of ancient wire netting, broken wheels, rusty implements, and anything else which had fallen to them for a shilling or two. Some of them had their wives and babies with them, sitting in the lorry-cabs while their men peered and poked with their sticks, turning over the stuff to scrutinize it.

At one sale an amusing thing happened. I arrived late, just as one of the diddecoys was about to break up a Cambridge or rib-roll with a sled-hammer. A rib-roll is made up of anything between two and four dozen cast-iron wheels, with pointed rims, on a common axle. I did not know then what its function was on arable land: to press down the furrows to close the air-spaces and to crack the heavy clods, before making the seed-bed. It was useful also for rolling wheat in spring, to consolidate the roots of the plants in soil made puffy by frost.

I had not bought one, as they weighed anything up to a ton, and the idea of pulling one to pieces, wheels and heavy axle and cast-iron side-pieces to which the wooden framed shafts were fitted, made me flinch. I would have to get one, however; and at the previous day's auction, had seen one go for £18. When, therefore, I arrived on the frozen field of the next sale, and saw a gipsy about to smash one up with an iron hammer, I went up to him and said, in the phrase I had learned from listening to others, 'Want to take a profit on it?' He stopped his swing, and replied, 'Yes, what will you offer for it?'

I made a calculation on the basis of old-iron. Rearmament had put the price up to 3s. a hundredweight. There were twenty-one wheels. Usually a wheel weighed about half a hundredweight. These wheels looked heavier than the ordinary ones I had seen, probably being six stone each. There was the axle, too. 'I'll give you thirty bob.'

'It's a deal,' as he struck my arm, a custom I had observed. Was this the origin of the phrase, 'striking a bargain'?

Later, I wondered how I was going to get it home. Wouldn't it have been wiser to have bought a new one, with proper tractor hitch, and to have paid for it by writing two articles, in comfort in a hired house? Here I was rushing about, feeding improperly, almost permanently querulous (except when sitting in front of the fire after a meal, sipping a cup of tea, and my feet warm before the stove). Why had I bought the beastly thing?

During the beer-and-sandwich interval, the diddecoy came up to me and said, 'Like to take a profit on your rib-roll? I'll give you half a crown on it.'

'Half a crown? Why, one like this sold for eighteen quid at Shouldham yesterday!'

'That had a tractor hitch. Will you take a crown profit?'

I shook my head.

'Look here, we know each other. Will you take ten bob profit?'

'What would you say if I asked you five quid for it?'

A man was in the offing. I knew he had asked the chap to buy it for him. The diddecoy went to him, and returned.

'Five quid did you say?'

'Yes, only I didn't say I'd sell it. I asked what you'd say if I asked a fiver.'

'Blast, you're a hot 'un, guv'nor! Won't you sell it for five quid?'

'No, I want it.'

'Okay, but you don't mind me asking?'

'Certainly not. Have a fag.'

After that, it was worth while giving him two bob to take the roll apart and get his mates to heave it up on the lorry, which they did expertly, knowing exactly how to get it on, by rolling it up the shafts, using two shepherd's iron bars from an adjacent lot. Afterwards an ancient Corn Dresser (8s.), harness (£3 3s.) and plough chains (11s.), were loaded. Then I went home. At 2 p.m. I was to meet Messrs. Barkway and Stubberfield, for the Valuation of Ingoing Covenants.

I arrived in time to have lunch of eggs and bacon with Ann

in the granary. I was pleased with my rib-roll, which I would get the blacksmith to fit with a tractor hitch. Ann looked happy, too.

The cars of the Valuers were drawn up outside the corn barn when I got there. Mr. Stubberfield had a new car, nearly as smart as Mr. Barkway's. As Mr. Barkway had told me in a letter, the previous year had been the worst he had known for farming, which meant extra activity for auctioneers, at both sales and valuations. In an age of flourishing agriculture, the services of Valuers would not be in such great demand. Their ruling was absolute; before a farmer could get a Valuer to act for him, he had to sign a blue-paper form giving him full powers to act on his behalf, and to abide by all and any of his decisions. The farmer was not supposed to see any details, or to inquire how any total sum was made up. The reason for this was obviously to avoid what otherwise might be endless arguments and controversy.

Mr. Strawless's steward came with us, carrying a dung-fork with ashen handle stained by much thrusting into heaps. We all walked to the lower yard. Mr. Barkway produced a measuring tape. Mr. Stubberfield held one end while Mr. Barkway ran it out to the other end. They measured the distance in yards. Both agreed it was twelve. Then they measured it in breadth. Afterwards, Mr. Barkway pushed the handle of a three-pronged dung-fork into the middle of the heap, and trod around it. Mr. Stubberfield withdrew the handle, and they agreed, and noted in their books, the depth of the muck-heap. The handle was pushed down in two other places, and agreement reached about the depths there.

There was a second and third heap in the other yards, which were measured in the same way; after which we walked up the hill to look at the haystacks on Twenty-one Acres.

These stacks were of red clover and Italian rye-grass. I had shot rabbits in the hayfield during the summer. The clover had been patchy, a poor growth. The rye-grass when cut was long and over-ripe. Such food was stalky, indigestible. It was third-rate hay, worth not more than 30s. a ton, according to the manager of a big farm, who recently had looked over the farm with me. Most of its valuable green colouring matter had been

bleached out of it. I had helped to get it in, when cut and overdried. There were many docks in it. The steward had told me to bite the blackish knots of a stalk, and taste the sugar. The seeds shook out of the head, and fell on the ground. Bob had told me that it had not been cut before it was full ripe because the idea had been to get the biggest bulk in order to increase its valuation price.

Someone had made a deep cut, about two feet wide, from top to bottom of the first rick. Thus the quality and density of the hay within was exposed. Mr. Barkway pulled a handful, sniffed it, passed it to Mr. Stubberfield, who also sniffed it. Then Mr. Barkway climbed to the top, with surprising agility. He got there by digging his toes into the pressed layers of hay, and working himself up by his elbows. The hay for the first three feet down the rick was darkish, where wet had penetrated. I remembered that the rick had stood unthatched from June till September. Well, it would be the last neglected rick on Old Castle Farm!

While standing up there, Mr. Barkway pulled out the tape from its leather case, and the rick was measured from peak to base. Afterwards he got down, and it was measured and checked in depth and length. The two remaining ricks were treated the same way, and notes made in the Valuers' books.

Then we walked through the roots of mangold and swede in Fourteen Acres, and examined them. Mr. Barkway said that allowance would have to be made for the unexhausted manures with which they had been grown. There was a standard table of such values: thus the value of farmyard manure remaining after one season was 50 per cent, while 75 per cent of superphosphate remained in the soil for the benefit of the succeeding crop. 'The usual thing is to allow for this when the receipt of the merchant who supplied the artificials is produced,' he said.

After notes had been made in the little books, we walked down to the new road between Fourteen Acres and Twenty-one Acres. 'The hay is yours,' said Mr. Barkway. 'So are the roots. You may lift them as soon as you wish. Also the muck is yours. How are you getting on?'

'Oh, bit by bit, or littles by littles as my steward says.' After a pause, I made myself say, 'Oh, by the way, can you tell me

about the estimate for the repairs which you wrote and said had been put out? It was some weeks since the contractor looked over the place with me, and the broken doors do let in the wind rather badly.'

'Oh, didn't I let you know? I am sorry. Let me see now.' He frowned to remember. 'Materials, forty-eight pounds, labour fifty-seven. Gates and posts, sixteen pounds, labour thirteen. You'll have to pay for materials, of course. The labour will be deducted from the Covenants which we've valued to-day. I'll be coming round shortly, to estimate the deterioration to the farm. I expect it will offset, even exceed, the value of the Covenants. It will have to go to arbitration, of course. I'll let you know when I'm coming. Well, good luck to the farming.'

I returned to look at my haystacks. I pulled a handful from the first stack, and sniffed it; then bit a stalk at the joint, to taste the sugar. My first haystack! I climbed up the crevass, kicking my toes into each side, as Mr. Barkway had done. I must get Bob to thatch over the crevass, to prevent further spoliation by rain. I made a note of it; then walked among the roots. A hare sat up, its black-tipped ears erect, then it bent down and loped away. How long since I had shot a hare? Eighteen years, up in Yorkshire, in 1919. Mr. Barkway had told me that hares did much damage; they were numerous; in the old days farmers used to have hare hunts, with guns and dogs, to keep them down. I thought of the children, and a small pack of beagles, myself as huntsman with a horn stuck between first and second brass button of my waistcoat; but that was another fancy. Heavens, I must go down, and do some writing. When would the drains in the yards, left by Sam, be finished? And the concrete slabs by the cowhouse, when would they be laid?

I saw Bob near the cowhouse, and asked him to get the crevass thatched. He replied that no-one else did that. I said I wanted the hay to be protected. It wouldn't take harm by the rain, replied Bob. Could he thatch? Not properly, but Father could, he said. Would he then ask Jimmy? Yes, he would ask him. He asked him and Jimmy replied, 'What do you want to do that for? It won't take harm, just that little bit.'

'Well then,' I said, feeling weariness at the repetition coming over me, 'do you mind doing it?'

'No, of course not, you're the Boss,' replied Bob. 'We'll do it if you order us to. But we ought to think about getting in the beet.'

'The beet? What beet?'

'The beet in Fourteen Acres. We ought to make a pie of it.'

'A pie?'

'You know, a pie we call it,' said Bob, looking a bit worried. 'For the frost,' he added.

'What ought we to do with roots, Bob?'

'Do with them?' he looked puzzled. 'Do you mean we should sell them?'

'No, we ought to have them on the farm. I don't want to sell anything like that—we must keep all the hay, straw, and roots.'

'I see,' said Bob. 'Shall I get them up in a pie?'

'I don't quite know what you mean by a pie.'

'It's a big heap.'

'Oh, I see! A clamp!'

'That's it,' said Bob. 'Only we call it a pie hereabouts. The swedes, now, they won't take no harm in the frost. But the beet will, so I think we ought to get them up, don't you, and cover them with straw. We've got to thresh Strawless's corn stacks, you know, and the straw is ours for threshing. That's the custom in these parts.'

'Yes, Mr. Barkway told me that. But first we ought to finish the concrete, don't you think, before the frost comes? Otherwise we can't work on it.'

'Just as you say,' replied Bob. 'And there's another thing. We ought to get some of the fields ploughed, for the frost. That's heavy old land on Hang High and Fox Covert, and the frost works down the furrows, if you see my meaning.'

'We ought to get some horses too.'

'Yes, I were going to ask you about hosses. And there's the tumbrils, we'll want two to cart the beet. And also the corn, when we thresh. We'll want some sacks too. And you ought to get some coal, and I can borrow a water-cart.'

'I must order the tractor, too. I ought to get a petrol pump, with a large tank, it's cheaper to buy in bulk. A seed-drill, too. Mr. Barkway says it's cheaper to buy implements new, if one can afford it.'

'You won't get so good ploughing by tractors as with hosses and my old single furrow plough,' said Bob, earnestly. 'Those tractors don't cut the thistles, and they score the land, bibble it like, round the headlands. You won't do better than hosses.'

'But hosses couldn't plough up Hilly Piece!'

'Yerr-se!' said Bob with a throw-up of one shoulder. 'Easy! Why, under Strawless I ploughed, cultivated, harrow'd, and drilled all the arable! Just me and the single furrow and two hosses. Sometimes I went out for weeks on end, just ploughin', and never see another bloke. I got fed up, I did, sometimes. But I love the land, you know! I wouldn't do no other job. That's born in a chap, I reckon.'

'Do you think we shall make a profit, Bob?'

'Blast, yes, easy! Strawless didn't lose his money farming, I reckon; he used to go off to Scotland to shoot, and racing these here small boats in the summer, he was. He made a good thing out of this farm, of course he did.'

'But about ploughing, Bob, do you really think hosses are enough on the farm?'

'Course I do, sir,' Bob usually threw in a 'sir' once a day. 'You can't beat hoss ploughing.'

'But Hilly Piece was never ploughed properly. I saw it in 1936 and 1937. It was a frightful sight!'

'Well, I had to slobber it over, to get by. I knew it wasn't proper work, 'course I did.'

'It's supposed to be in small seeds now, isn't it? There's hardly a plant of clover or rye-grass in the stubble. And the stubble is 90 per cent thistle stalks.'

'The seeds failed, that's a rum 'n to get a seed-bed on. We sowed small seeds the year you first came, you know, and they didn't take. Birds got'm, or suthing. It's an old sud, that field. My hosses used to sweat, drawing the single furrow, and stand still half a dozen times going up. Of course the poor beggars was usually only fed on a bit of old hay and a mangold or two. But we could never do anything with Hilly Piece. You've got to catch it right, and then put half a dozen teams on it all to once, for one morning that's too slippery, turning up like liver, and the next that's hard as rock. In the old days, you know, they ploughed it with teams of bullocks, very slow they was, but

they got it done. Fat as butter they was, all the linseed cake they could put into them, then off to market, eleven and twelve hundredweight each. You'll do no good with a tractor up there, I've seen them trying to tackle it more than once, and digging themselves in or turning over backwards. Waste of money, I reckon.'

I was beginning to experience the conservatism of the labourer's mind. Jimmy had criticized the concrete slabs as dead money—'the hosses would slip down and break their knees', etc. 'What do you want to spend all that money for, that was all right before, all this fancy work won't pay for itself, that's my way of thinking.'

'You'll see, Jimmy!'

'H'mph,' said Jimmy. 'You'll larn, guv'nor.'

Chapter Twenty-four

I BUY HORSES AND ACQUIRE SOME STRAW



The greatest difficulty during the first months of my new career of farming lay within myself. When I began the new life, I had already been a writer for almost twenty years. For twenty years my mind had been set to create imaginatively. If I had not actually been writing, I had been thinking of what I should write: I had been living, often intensely, in my imagination. My mind was set that way.

When I started farming, therefore, I was ill-equipped in more ways than one. In my mind I could create a field of corn out of a wilderness: I could make a word-picture of it—the silky grey-green wind-wave on midsummer barley, the rustle of yellowing oats, the stiffer sway of wheat, the lark singing in the sky and the kestrel's shadow moving down the grass of the windy hill. Even in the sphere of country things imagination was stronger than reality. Thus people sometimes told me it seemed strange that I did not appear to enjoy actual country scenes, such as sunsets, moonlight over the river, or the Severn Sea from the great cliffs above Lynton. I lived in the past too much, some of the critics said; actually I was living in the scenes I would use for my books. For years writing had been for me a whole-time job, so I was not much good for anything else, if, indeed, I was any good for that. So when I started farming my mind was not adjusted to the plane of action; it was not patient, it raced ahead of the present, it anticipated its desires, it was too quick and varied for those working with me; and its imaginative speed was inevitably frustrated by their more deliberate slowness. It was one thing to imagine a farm with perfect roads;

buildings in fine repair; implements always efficient and aligned in rows; sacks always folded tidily; every rat-hole stopped and not one grain of wheat spoiled by so much as a mouse: and another to see, as I did on my farm all the time, the dereliction, the mud, the weeds, the dilapidated buildings, swarms of rats, broken tiles, rotting floors, decayed and flapping doors, swampy meadows, cracked bridges, flat gates and overgrown hedges. Sometimes I found reality temporarily unbearable; the gulf between aspiration and reality was too great. After each day's work I sat before the little stove in the granary, too tired to take off my wet boots and puttees: but I must get myself together for my other work, and force myself to write. In the old days I had often written all night, but now I found I could not go on beyond midnight. I knew when it rained because the rusty vein down the stove-pipe glistened and the stove hissed. Often I rose from my desk in mental dejection, even misery.

About a fortnight before Christmas, after an appeal from Mr. Stubberfield to help him in his difficult position as Trustee of the old tenant's affairs, I gave up work on the cottages and prepared to thresh the corn. I hoped that the new tractor, ordered without demonstration or inspection of any kind, would arrive in time for the threshing. We had two horses; but they were not enough to do the two jobs—bringing the corn down the steep slippery land of Hilly Piece to the barn, and taking up water. I had found out that the steam engine would use four hundred gallons a day, which meant hauling up four thousand pounds a day from the river to the Hang High field. And the only water-cart I had was a rickety affair of wobbly iron wheels and diminutive tank-body which slopped most of its eighty-gallon contents over the sides as it lurched behind Gilbert, the black horse.

The two new tumbrils had arrived. They were nearly six feet wide, and one was nine feet long, the other nine feet six inches. They had horse shafts, designed for quick removal, and iron tractor hitches to fit in their place. The idea was to draw the muck up the steep hills by tractor, then hand over to horses, while taking back the empty tumbril waiting on the high ground.

They looked to be splendid vehicles, shining with varnish

over their red and green paint, my name and village in white letters on the side. Their fine new rubber wheels would halve the back-breaking labour of horses on the hilly land.

I took Bob in the Silver Eagle to an auction, to buy the horses. As at the other auctions, it was a trepidant time for me. All the hard-faced dealers were there—and the farmer whose sale it was probably looking around to spot buyers, estimate their temperaments, and put in bids against them. Bob was cool and calculating, sparrow-hawk-eyed; myself nervously nose-poking up the guineas while the old fear returned on me: was I making a fool of myself? Thirty and a half guineas—trot her out again—there's a fine mare, gentlemen, Blossom by name, who'll fill it up—make it thirty-one guineas—going for thirty and a half guineas—going for thirty and a half guineas—for the last time, I'm going to sell her—going for thirty and a half guineas—the stick fell, he looked at me, I called out my name: and Blossom, chestnut mare, aged, 'stinted to Mr. Walker's horse, Holkham Pioneer', was mine. Then Gilbert was lumbering round the ring, black gelding, 'nine' years old. He was thin and ragged as an old crow. 'Blast, I like him,' muttered Bob, chewing fag-end, 'Go on, get 'm. You're a-right, go on. I won't see you wrong. Blast, I like that horse. You can go to twenty pound, safe.' At twenty-eight guineas Gilbert was mine. In a large van, they arrived home. A week later, the lice in our stables, dormant since last Michaelmas, were breeding on their coats. We rubbed linseed oil on them, to induce the parasites to become vegetarians, and then washed off the glutted bodies with paraffin and water. Meanwhile Blossom could not eat her crushed oats and chaff. She had lampas, or swelled gums. Also the horses were continually stamping; indeed, while trying to sleep in the granary, which adjoined the stables, I heard them banging away on the cobbles, most of the night.

For about a year during my service in the Army, I had been an infantry transport officer, in charge of about seventy horses and mules on the old Somme battlefield; and I knew all about mud-rash, lice, mites, and greasy heel. When I suggested that the stamping should be cured, I found that the knowledge of the possible existence of mites in the skin of a horse's legs had not yet apparently travelled so far as the village.

'That's in the blood. Horses always stamp, you know,' said Bob.

'I agree that such things are in their blood, or rather sucking it, and that is why they stamp. We ought to clip the hair, and then wash the legs with strong disinfectant.'

'I've never seen it done,' demurred Bob.

'Very well, then, to convince you I'll get the vet. You'll believe him.'

'Well, won't it cost a lot of money?'

'It will save shoes being kicked off, anyway.'

'Blossom's only done that once, and the shoe was old.'

'But it's **WRONG** to have lousy horses. Who do you think I am, Strawless? I'm going to get this farm in a decent state, that's why I bought it. I'll ask the vet. to come.'

The veterinary surgeon arrived, with gag, twitch, and enormous forceps; and having pulled one tooth of Blossom's and rasped the others, gave us mercuric ointment to be rubbed into Gilbert's legs. I bought a clipper, which the vet. recommended using before giving three washings, at five-day intervals, to kill any new-hatched mites. On the next rainy day, when we could not work with the concrete mixer, I asked the men to begin creosoting the woodwork of the stable buildings, and was told—it was becoming a matter of course—that no-one else did such things.

'Well, I am going to do such things. Here's a pail, there's a brush, here's a drum of creosote. I'll go and get two more pails and brushes.' That evening the ancestral colonies of lice in the cracks of the posts, were killed; and the next day, as it was still raining, the beetle-maggots which were eating the heart out of the beams and rafters joined the lice.

'Blast, that looks good now, I'll admit,' said Bob, adding, 'Perhaps you're right to spend money on all these jobs, but Father and me don't want to see you go wrong.'

'I appreciate that, Bob, and assure you I'm not going wrong.'

'There's nothin' comin' in, if you see my meaning,' he replied, with a worried look, 'it's all pay-pay-pay, and I know bad work when I sees it, and some on them think you don't know. Some on 'em would be glad to see you go bust,' he

went on, doggedly, 'I don't like to hear it. "What's he know about it?" they say, and it worries me.'

'Don't let it worry you, Bob. In three or four years' time, this farm won't be recognizable.'

The night before threshing I sat before the stove, wet because for the past six hours I had been trying to make a two-stroke engine and piston-pump outfit, bought as one unit, do its job of pumping up water from the new artesian well. The well had been sunk below the chalk quarry, during July, by a local well-sinker, seventy-five feet, at nine shillings a foot. My idea was to load an empty one-hundred-and-fifty-gallon sherry cask on the trailer which I had brought from Devon, fill the cask with water, then draw it by tractor up Hilly Piece, roll it off the trailer, ready for the threshing engine, then return for the second cask. I worked by the light of a hurricane lamp for several hours, trying to fix this. For some reason the new engine would not fire; when it did start, amidst clouds of acrid blue smoke, the pump would not draw water. There was an air-leak somewhere in the union with the flexible rubber pipes. Covering the outfit with sacks, I left it there. Anyway, the tractor had not arrived, so even if I had been able to fill the casks, I would not have been able to draw them up to the scene of threshing.

While I sat there a knock on the door. 'Come in,' I called. We had a new door now, which kept the draughts out. The steward came in. 'We shan't be in no muddle over the water,' he said. 'I've seen Farmer Oldman; he's a decent chap, and will lend us his water-cart. If the new tractor arrives to-morrow morning, can it pull up the water? I've got a scoop, and we can fill the water-cart from the river. Blast, I don't like to punish the hosses, up that steep hill. You don't have to worry. I've got the extra men. May I borrow a horse? We'll need three if the tractor don't arrive. I'll see you a-right.'

Too weary even to remove wet boots and puttees, too tired to do anything but sag in the chair and stare at the stove with its pipe sticking out of the loose tiles above, its flames and smoke sometimes pouring into the room, I sat there all night. It was blowing half a gale outside, and raining hard, as I knew from the glistening snake of water moving down the stove-pipe.

I was out at six o'clock next morning. The horses were

watered, fed, groomed, by the light of the swinging lantern. After breakfast, I took the lorry to the station. The tractor hadn't come. Using the borrowed horse, Bob and Norman filled the water-cart in the river; then the slow, heaving, straining plod up the 1-in-3½ gradient of Hilly Piece. The fifty-year-old engine had arrived the day before, drawing thresher and elevator: twenty-five tons puffing and jolting slowly, leaving torn tracks in the thistle-stubble.

The borrowed water-cart was a coffin-shaped iron tank on three small but heavy iron wheels, two behind and one in front. Its weight sank it in the stubble to the axles. It became a plough, scarcely to be pulled by three horses. Could they do it? It was murderous work, up that hill, in the rain. What a thirst the engine had! Two tons of water for one stack of corn.

From first light to last light, save for the half-hour for lunch (which habitually was forty minutes), nine men worked up there on the Hang High field, in a north-east wind which blew steam white and ragged from the engine. Straw stack rose as corn stack shrank, rats ran out; seeds of dock, charlock, and other weeds—enough to fill eight tumbrils—made a large pyramid under the thresher, the drum roared mildly, yellow grains fell steadily into the sacks. Old Billy, one of the original road-makers, tending the calder or husk to windward, was feathery-grey from eyebrows to sack-wrapped legs—a grey fluffy figure, covered with thistle seed. Snow flurried out of the sky; wild ducks and curlew hurtled over; the world became white; still the work went on until the snow became rain, and the great ruts leading over the stubble became black again. I thought the rubber tyres would bulge off, coming down the side of Hilly Piece, tumbrils loaded with twenty sacks, weighing two tons. I determined to cut a road along the side of the hill by next harvest.

Three days later the threshing was done. Nearly five hundred coombe of barley was heaped, each field separate because it was of different quality, on the asphalt barn floors. The market value was between six and seven hundred pounds. On the fourth morning I went to the station in the lorry with Bob to fetch the new tractor. At that station I sent a telegram to Devon, telling

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the family to come up two or three days before Christmas. We would all live in the granary. If the cottages were not finished by Christmas Eve, they must remain unfinished. The rebuilding had already cost just over £550, to which must be added £200 of the original cost. The woodwork was unpainted, the walls rough with plaster. In some rooms, the original dirty, scaly plaster remained. There were no drains, no cesspit. Bugg Houses had become Williamson's Folly.

Chapter Twenty-five

THE FIRST FURROW



I turned away from the failure of my scheme and regarded the new tractor. It was as beautiful as the cottages were sordid. The cottages were a manifestation of greed, confusion, sloth, and stupidity; the tractor was a work of genius. It was the result of many years' experimenting by a Belfast engineer named Harry Ferguson. The Ferguson tractor was not a great lumbering old-fashioned thing which drew a contraption of heavy iron framing of plough-breasts and shares, an iron monster that would press down the land with its weight and dig itself into the hill-side. It was half the weight of an ordinary tractor, built of aluminium and of immensely strong steel, and it carried its twin-furrow plough under its tail, on three steel arms that looked like a grasshopper's hind legs. On pulling a lever like the short gear-change lever of a racing car, the twin ploughs lifted up out of the ground. Instead of lugging a heavy sledge of ploughs around a field, bibbling, as Bob said, at the corners, this new design of tractor lifted its tail, and, put in reverse, moved back to exactly where one wanted to drop the implements. It had a petrol engine which looked absurdly small; but the engine would be in use two or three seasons after an ordinary paraffin-fired engine was scrapped.

Both Bob and Jimmy were sceptical of its performance. 'You won't beat hosses on that ould sud of a Hilly Piece. No tractor can git up thar.' So, as soon as it was run on planks off the lorry, I took it to Hilly Piece. Years ago—twenty years to be exact, taking it back to 1918—the land was properly farmed. This field then was ploughed by teams of bullocks. After the war, there was a gradual decline in farming, corresponding to a slow disinte-

gration of the simple human virtues in those countries which were victorious. Hilly Piece used to grow fifteen and sixteen sacks of barley an acre; in the harvest of 1937 it grew less than five. The field in August was silver-grey with thistles hiding the small thin stalks bearing 'mouse-ear' barley.

It was twilight when I got to the field. I took the tractor to the bottom of the steepest part. The engine purred almost silently. I pushed down the lever controlling the hydraulic gear, which dropped the twin ploughs. I put it in ploughing gear, let in the clutch, and opened the throttle.

The thistle giant of Goliath had possession of Hilly Piece. Was this small grey machine its David?

The little machine went up without the least falter. Its thin spiky wheels pressed the ground lighter than horse-hoofs would have done. Its twin shares bit into the sullen soil and turned it over, exposing a tangle of white roots. I heard Bob mutter: 'Blast, I like that patent,' as he stared at it. This was the highest praise from one who regarded many of my schemes with hard-eyed caution. I was beginning to realize with the early Victorian author of *The Chronicles of Clay Farm*, that the hardest part of farming lay in the stubbornness of the human ideas.

Two days later, myself riding the grey tractor, and Bob leading Blossom and Gilbert hitched to the old single-furrow plough, we went up to Fourteen Acres. Our 150 tons of mangolds were in their 'pie' by the haystacks, covered against frost by some of the straw threshed out on Fox Covert. I was eager to start ploughing before the frost spoiled the mangold tops, which, turned-in while yet green, would be good manure.

Bob gave me my first lesson in setting-out a field for ploughing. First he and I paced out the field, setting sticks where the single-furrow plough was to 'set-in'. Then he drove his plough across the field. I followed on the Ferguson tractor, steering in the furrow, and feeling an immense satisfaction when I looked over my shoulder, to watch the swede and mangold tops being turned under in two furrows, and the new earth lying on top. At last I was ploughing my own land!

The day was cold and clear. Far away, through a gap in the trees bordering the Castle Hills, I saw the North Sea, white and harried by the polar wind, which to me was exhilarating. The

tops and leaves of the mangolds were 'as good as a coat of muck' for the land. They would rot under the furrow I was ploughing, and feed the barley that would be sown here later on. With considerable interest and pleasure I watched green heavy clusters of leaves disappearing under the brown corkscrewing of earth behind me.

I reflected that, ten years ago, writing of such a scene, my inclination would have been to describe a pair of great horses plodding before poor old Hodge, the swingle-trees swaying as the traces or chains tautened; the wave of earth rearing up and turning over, the soft shear of the share, the bright breast of the plough gleaming like a curved silver sunflower petal. Behind white gulls would weave and fall, uttering cries of the wild seashore. And all day Hodge, an old sack over his shoulders against driving rain, in broken boots, a bit of bread and cheese his only dinner, toiling there against the elements. And twenty years ago I would have scorned to mention even an iron horse-plough; my Hodge (by way of Hardy and Jefferies) would have driven a plough of wood, apple-tree wood. As for writing about a tractor, that snorting, fume-making, craft-killing ugliness, I would have scorned such things of civilized decadence. (I would conveniently have forgotten my racing motor-cycle in this connection.)

Now for a truthful picture. This ploughman's shoulders were protected by a leather flying-coat, with collar. There *was* a sack; it covered the iron seat of the machine I was steering. No, that isn't quite true: the machine was steering itself. I merely sat on a sack-covered iron seat, and was carried across the field by the power of twenty synthetic horses. My feet and legs were inside rubber boots, warmed by the torpedo-like body of the tractor. My hands were warm in thick leather gloves, of horse-hide, bought at Wanamaker's Stores in New York eight years before, and still in good condition, after constant use.

To start the first furrow of our new venture, the steward had worn his new buskins, with six overcoats. Even so clad, the polar wind was so cold that his face, as he walked behind the horses, steering the plough, was blue and shrunken. I was well wrapped, wearing a pair of poplin pyjama trousers under my flannel trousers, and over them, a pair of blue dungaree overalls. These three layers kept the air warm around my legs.

The job seemed easy. All I had to do was to let the tractor steer itself up the straight trough whence the previous furrow had been turned, to the other end of the field. Then I pulled a lever, and the twin ploughs, controlled by automatic oil-pumps, were lifted by three steel arms out of the earth. My tail up, as it were, I steered along the headland to the next marked furrow, and, pushing the lever forward, began to plough down another marked-out stretch.

The field being set out, I was left alone, as the horses had to go for straw, to litter the yards for the bullocks which would soon be coming to eat the hay and roots and make the muck. I felt a warmth of satisfaction coming over me. I was a ploughman, I had found freedom.

There was no mud by the yards now; our new concrete slabs, covering the drains, were lovely to walk on. I found myself singing as the wind blew hard. I was doing one of the finest, the most useful, the most natural—and the least rewarded—jobs on earth.

Half-way down my fourth furrow, I heard, above the subdued roar of the engine, a noise like an ungreased axle. It became a jingle, then a jangle. Looking round, I found myself staring into the brown eyes of a white bird less than a yard from my face. Behind its spread whiteness other birds were dipping, cutting, interweaving, alighting on the earth with upheld wings, scrambling, pecking, flapping, jostling, about the dark-brown furrows. My first gulls!

They were black-headed gulls in winter dress. Their wings were pearl and white, their reddish-brown feet were thrust forward as air-brakes while alighting. So many worms and grubs were being turned up that soon the foremost birds were sated. They dropped out of the scramble, and stood still in the furrows, becoming smaller and smaller as I went down the field. As I came up again, their competitive or greedy feelings overcame their fulness, and one by one, after hesitation and false starts, jumped off the furrow and flew upwind and cut down into the screaming throng again. I soon got used to them—there were more than a thousand. Myself and machine seemed to be releasing from the earth a whirl of silver-white life which uttered metallic cries, parts of which all the time were losing

animation, becoming drops and beads of cold solder on the earth.

Bob had said to me, 'If you have a tractor, you'll scare away the pheasants.' In Norfolk, with its light soil and light rainfall, pheasants are numerous. Light land and light rainfall mean that the chicks' feet in spring do not get clogged, so they survive, where on heavy land, in a wet spring, they would perish. I saw more pheasants while ploughing that afternoon than I had seen while walking by the hedges and through the woods all the past summer. One cockbird was so indifferent to me and my tractor that he spread his wings, bowing and generally showing off to three dead-leaf mottled hens, within five yards of us. He chased one, then another, quite impartially. Pigeons, too, usually so shy and careful, so keen-sighted, flew down to feed on the tops of the adjacent rows of swedes, quite heedless of the noise. Rooks came too, to hammer at those swedes, with jackdaws and grey hoodie crows.

But when I turned to take their photographs with a camera, what a change! The cock pheasant ran away as fast as he could; the hens merged themselves to invisibility in the central furrows. Pigeon, rook, crow, gull—all departed. A few minutes later, they were back again.

After ploughing about three acres, or six hours, excluding half an hour for lunch under the hedge, I began to resent the noise of the engine. I was colder than I had thought. The field was less brown, the trees less distinct, the sea through the pines was growing dim. Light and darkness were equal. I began to feel a rising tremor of excitement within me. The children would now be half-way from London, somewhere beyond Cambridge. They had caught the nine o'clock from Devon, Mother and the five children. The two smallest ones would be tired. I found the inward tremor change to panic. I must hurry: in less than an hour they would be arriving at Whelk station. What should I say to them, expecting to enter a fine new farmhouse home? I had turned the men off; the cottages were made, except for bits of plastering, inside doors, painting, and colouring the walls. But they looked too bare and bleak: the granary was more home-like, draughty and dark as it was.

Putting the tractor in top gear, and with twin gleaming

ploughs in air, I went down fast to the hedge; picked up my dinner bag, slung it over my shoulder, through the new creosoted gate and down the hill, and the half-finished gully-road, to the cart-shed. Then to the granary, to see the fire glowing in the stove, and blankets and sleeping-bags airing round it. They felt dry and warm, said Ann, as she filled the kettle, and set it on the top of the stove. Bread, butter, knives, forks, plates, cups, all there in the box. A cup of tea hastily swallowed: I must not be late at the station! My good friend John Heygate had met them at Paddington, taken them to his house, given them coffee and milk and sandwiches and rest awhile, before driving them to Liverpool Street Station and the train to Norfolk. Round to the cart-shed again, push out the old open car—will the engine start? The battery was dud, I must renew it—attach trailer for luggage, and off along the narrow winding coast road to the station. Ten minutes to wait, time to put the hood up. At last it was puffing round the curve. Would they be there? Supposing something had happened to stop them? Ah, there was one face! Two faces, four faces, five faces, six faces. Hulloo. And who might this be? In sailor hat and suit, and carrying spade and bucket. The baby? But he can talk! What's he saying? Bossy Gibber? Oh, Blossom and Gilbert the horses! They're fine. Hulloo, Robbie, you've grown, too. But where are those thick yellow curls? And Margaret dear, how grown-up you look! No, I'm afraid I haven't got your pony yet. But I've got two lovely little carts, one a governess car or jingle, as we called them in Devon long ago, and the other a bit larger. Hulloo, John. Yes, Windles, you shall do some ploughing, rather. How are you, Loetitia? I've got some hens, and they actually lay eggs! I'll get the luggage, the trailer's on the car. Here we are. I'm afraid the cottages won't be ready just yet, m'dear, but the granary's warm, now I've altered the stove, and the wind's dropped. I've got the hood up, for the small children. Now we're off, we'll soon be there, only four miles. Hark! what's that? A strange jangling, honking, cronkling noise, hundreds of noises all together, high up in the sky. Listen, children! The wild geese coming in from the sea! This is the Coast of the Wild Geese!

Forgotten were the unhappy hours, the mental struggle against decay and dirt, against spiritual and material decadence:

the wild geese were the genius of the place, bringing life to it at last. Devon was alive for me because of the salmon, the mystic ocean wanderer: now life was flowing through me once more, for that the wild geese were fighting in from the sea. Beauty was come again.

Flocks of the birds were flying inland at intervals all night, we heard them in the granary, as we sat at the long oak table, eating roast pheasant which Mrs. Hammet had cooked for us. How the children loved the granary. They ran up and down the stairs, they explored all the dark nooks and caves among the stacked furniture, they thought it ever so much nicer than an ordinary house. While they were undressing overhead, their bare feet running on the boards, I knew then I was right to have brought them here, to the farm. They believed in me, in all I had promised, for the new life to be. I must not fail them, they were England, the new England. This was only the beginning.

When they all were sleeping upstairs I went outside into the frosty night, and saw the stars again as though for the first time, Aldebaran the glaring eye of the Bull, Sirius the Dogstar bay-ing green-fire across the southern horizon, behind Orion the hunter; and I saw the Great Bear, and the gem-like shimmer of the Pleiades. Starlight and sunlight had fallen for a thousand thousand centuries on this valley, the earth endureth for ever, and men shall serve the earth of England, and the earth shall serve men, of our race, the English, for ever.

In the starlight I climbed the hill, and looked up into the sky, and felt the earth bearing me up, the strong earth, dear earth: and as other men had before me, but wordlessly, I prayed.

Chapter Twenty-six

A VISION OF CHRISTMAS



Christmas Eve, 1937

The frost glitters in the starlit grasses; the horse pond is frozen; wild geese fly overhead. When I open the granary door, I see bare trees dark against the sky. It is Christmas again, and I have a rendezvous in ancient moonlight, with you and you and you, unknown comrades of that first Christmas . . . when for myself and my friends, a miracle broke into the near-hopelessness of our youthful lives. The human facts of that marvellous and (in retrospect) poignantly beautiful time still live, for many of my generation, with the hope that its knowledge-feeling may increase, that eventually all men in Europe will be inspired by its truth. A long time ago, Christmas 1914—twenty-three years—nearly a quarter of a century. Yet we still hope, those who were there—the living and the dead—that the vision of peace we *lived* during those few rare hours may be made real and everlasting.

Geese are fighting overhead as I write this, sitting in the granary of my Norfolk farm. Overhead, up the worm-eaten stairs, my little children sleep in a heap of sacks and rugs. They are warm and snug; they dream of Christmas. The cries of the wild geese bring sharply before me a bare and frozen wood of Flanders, charcoal braziers, bearded men in woollen balaclava helmets, rifles piled, starlight, and the smoke of green wood fires.

For weeks we had lived in flooded trenches. The Germans were eighty yards away. Our trench was enfiladed; we lost many men, shot by snipers. Night after night since the tailing-off of the battle for Ypres we had toiled on the ~~mapets~~ ^{mapets}, filling

sandbags with clayey mud; squelched through the muddy lagoons of woodland tracks, carrying rations, duck-boards, pumps, ammunition. We were volunteers, rushed out to help General French's shattered Expeditionary Force. A few weeks before we had been schoolboys, bank clerks, undergraduates, medical students. Now our lives were ravaged. Some of us (the young ones who thought of their mothers) were near to despair. We were without hope, without horizon.

At first trench-life had been interesting, even enjoyable. It was fun cooking our own bacon and making tea in the wood, while shrapnel cracked overhead; good sport stalking the wild geese in the marshes; satisfying to feel the soft hairs of our unshaven chins. The regulars were decent chaps, heroes of Mons. But the rains fell, and the trenches filled almost waist-high. After a few days, we could scarcely move our legs; nor did we seem to need food. At night we dragged ourselves out of the ditches, and moved about, uncaring of bullets aimed at random in the dark. All night we worked, in carrying parties, pumping fatigues, at parapet-building; at dawn we slid into water again, and set ourselves to endure the grey daylight. Even now, so long afterwards, when I hear the rain on the tiles overhead, the ghost of that time makes me draw the blankets closer round my neck.

On Christmas Eve of 1914 we were in the support line, about two hundred yards inside Ploegsteert Wood. It was freezing. Our overcoats were stiff as boards, our boots were too hard to remove, but we rejoiced. The mud was hard too! Also, happy thought, we would be able to *sleep* that night—inside a new blockhouse of oak-boughs and sandbags called Piccadilly Hotel. Sleep! No bed but the cold earth, no blankets even; but sleep.

Then came a message from brigade headquarters, brought, I think, by Second-Lieutenant Bruce Bairnsfather of the Warwicks. Wiring parties were required in no-man's-land all night. And there would be a moon. We would have to work only fifty yards from the German machine-guns in the White House opposite the eastern edge of the wood.

Two hours later, we filed out of the dark trees, into the naked moonlight, terror of no-man's-land, holding shovels beside

our faces, in hope of protection against the expected mortar-blast. The moon was high and white among frozen cloudlets. We were visible. Someone slipped, with a clank of spade or rifle. We flung ourselves on our faces. We waited. The battlefield was silent as the moon.

For an hour we worked in silence, in a most mysterious soundlessness. What had happened? We began to talk naturally as we drove in stakes, and pulled out concertinas of prepared wire. There was no rifle-fire either up or down the line, from way up north beyond Ypres to south beyond Armentières and the French Army. At midnight we were laughing as we worked. We heard singing from the German lines—carols the tunes of which we knew. I noticed a very bright light on a tall pole, raised in their lines. Down opposite the East Lancs trench, in front of the convent, a Christmas tree, with lighted candles, was set on their parapet. The unreal moonlight life went on, happily. Cries of 'Come over, Tommy! We won't fire at you!'

A dark figure approached me, hesitatingly. A trap? I walked towards it, with bumping heart. 'Merry Christmas, English friend!' We shook hands, tremulously. Then I saw that the light on the pole was the Morning Star, the Star in the East. It was Christmas morning.

All Christmas Day grey and khaki figures mingled and talked in no-man's-land. Picks and spades rang in the hard ground. It was strange to stare at the dead we had only glimpsed, swiftly, from the trenches. The shallowest graves were dug, filled, and set with crosses knocked together from lengths of ration-box wood, marked with indelible pencil. 'For King and Country.' 'Für Vaterland und Freiheit.'

Fatherland and Freedom! *Freedom?* How was this? *We were* fighting for freedom, our cause was just, we were defending Belgium, civilization . . . these fellows in grey were good fellows, they were—strangely—just men like ourselves. 'How can we lose the war, English comrade? Our cause is just, we are ringed with enemies who would crush us economically, we asked only for a place in the sun, and now we are defending our parents, our homes, our German soil. No, we cannot lose the war—for Right is on our side.' A most shaking, staggering thought: that both sides thought they were fighting for the

same cause! The war was a terrible mistake! People at home did not know this! Then the Idea came to the young and callow soldier, that if only he could tell them all at home *what was really happening*, and if the German soldiers told their people the truth about us, the war would be over. But he hardly dared to think it, even to himself.

The next day was quiet, and the next. Waving hands from the trenches by day; singing and reflected blaze of trench bonfires at night. It was a lovely time. On the third afternoon came a message from the Germans. 'At midnight our staff officers visit, and we must fire our automatic *pistolen*, but we will fire high, nevertheless please keep under cover.' At 11 p.m.—Berlin midnight—we saw the flashes going away into the air.

Two days later, an Army Order came from G.H.Q. to the effect that men found fraternizing with the enemy would be court-martialled, and if found guilty, would suffer the death penalty. And again in that place the Very lights soared over no-man's-land at night, and bullets cut showers of splinters from the trees, and sometimes, human flesh and bone.

So Hope sank into the mud again, but did not die, despite a withering anew as each poor human unit fell in machine-gun mort-blast and colossal reverberating rending of the shells of those four years—the years whose Truth seems to be incommunicable. Sometimes, as one listens to what people say, here in the England a generation died for, it seems almost like pre-war again; and my heart is heavy with all the weight of the darkness—the prejudice—of men's minds.

The wild geese cry as they pass high under the moon, flying for the clover fields, my little children stir in their sleep, the morning star of Hope is rising once again.

Chapter Twenty-seven

I BUY STOCK AND SEED



I enjoyed ploughing. It was pleasant to be among the gulls weaving and interweaving whitely behind me. As I turned my head over my shoulder I liked watching the coiled white roots of bindweed come up with the furrow and be buried again with the cut roots of thistles. I liked to feel the shear of the soil on the mouldboards, and the power of the tractor bursting up the earth. But after eight or nine hours of this I was glad, in the early January evenings, to take the tractor downhill to the cartshed about dusk, first stiffly removing the layers of soil pressed to the steel wheels with their four-inch spuds, or teeth. I made it a rule to clean the wheels every time on the grass of the pasture leading off the arable; for the soil under the grass was light and sandy, and the wads of clay, spread about, would help to improve the grazing, instead of laying mud on my new roads.

When we had a spare day or two we got on the concrete mixer again, and laid about twenty tons of concrete. I laid bits of broken tiles on the surface while it was soft, to prevent slipping of horses.

After Christmas we moved into the cottages, and our four men cleared up the garden, which was littered with the rubbish of the demolition and the building operations. All the chalky soil dug from the back walls of the cottages—twenty tons or more—I had put on the gardens, to stiffen the light soil made lighter by the coal-ashes of nearly a century. We dug up the ground, first tearing out many useless suckers of a wild plum, a non-bearing pear-tree, and bushes of elderberry. When we had made up the paths and the yard with clean gravel, and put up a gate and painted it white—to keep the small children from run-

ning out directly to the main road on which cars and lorries were constantly passing—the place looked less desolate. Bit by bit I began to feel relief from the constant pressure of objects decadent to be made whole and sweet again; but the list of such objects was endless. The entire village life, thought, and standard was based on resignation and prejudice.

On the farm the immediate problem arose, What to do with our mangolds and swedes? Something other than rats and rabbits ought to eat them. I wrote to a farming association I had joined, and asked them to buy me some good Aberdeen-Angus bullocks. No dealer then would be fobbing off bad 'doers' on me, I thought. The bullocks, costing £17 each, arrived at Whelk station, from Ireland, by way of Fishguard about ten days later. Bob and I were driven in by Loetitia at six o'clock, in the darkness; then she went home to the new top cottage, where all washing-up water, slops, etc., had to be carried outside and thrown on the garden. The water-boards of the new doors leaked, and after rain the floor was a pool of water. The new kitchen range was not properly covered in by the sheet-iron cover over it, and the draught was faulty; it cooked irregularly. One day the stove roared, in a north-east wind; another time, it burned dully. The new floor, of concrete mixed with red ochre colouring and expensive waterproofing powder, was dusty. The bricklayers had left the two doors open at night when it was just laid, and the draught had dried it off too quickly; and trying to smooth it over, they had 'floated' it the next day. The new windows, too, did not fit in the frames; some were warped. Truly I had bought my experience.

Bob and I walked back with the bullocks. They moved slowly, being excessively thin. I went ahead with a lantern, Bob walked behind. We got home about nine o'clock, and put them in the meadow. Old Billy was the yardsman, receiving extra money to work on Sundays, feeding them. We kept them on hay at first, with a few white turnips, lest they should scour. The hay was tough and old, and they wouldn't eat it. We had to chaff it in the barn. Even so, their condition was so poor that they scoured, and one soon fell ill. He was having too many roots, I told Billy. The others were scouring, too. When the old fellow was slicing swedes in the hand-machine I had bought at

an auction, I noticed he threw them in with the earth on. I told him the roots should be cleaned first, but 'Ooh, they don't take any harm from a little earth, it's good for them'. So I did not interfere further; but when the scouring continued for nearly two weeks, I ordered him to clean the roots first, cut down the ration to very little, and to be sure to give each beast ten pounds of chopped hay in the bins. It was difficult to talk to him and my inexperience was a handicap. I had had a visit from one of the advisers of the Norfolk Agricultural Station near Norwich during the past summer, and we had walked together over the farm, and I had made notes of his advice about cultivations and fertilizers. Now I wrote to him, and sought his advice about the bullocks. It was this advice that Billy found hard to take. He was a tired man, and I discovered later that he knew scarcely more about it than I did. I told him to wrap the sick bullock, which was not eating, in warm sacks, and to feed it on warm milk and pig meal; but both he and Bob informed me that such things were not done on other farms. Billy's idea of the bullock's being cured was to put it alone in a dark place near the yard, with a pail of cold water ('Cold water is as good as a tonic to a bullock'), a pail of earth ('They like to lick it, you know') and one or two chopped swedes lying in a wooden box.

As it got worse, I asked the vet. to come out. He ordered warm sacks, warm gruel, another bullock in the box for warmth and company. The other nine bullocks, he said, must be given no roots, until they stopped the dangerously exhausting scouring. Also, they should have 2 lbs. each of decorticated ground-nut cake every day.

Meanwhile we had finished ploughing the 'olland' (aftermath of the hay crop) of Twenty-one Acres, and I went to buy some barley seed in Norwich market. My first visit to the Corn Hall was bewildering and again the hollow feeling came in me, of my utter incapability of knowing about farming. The Hall was filled with wooden stands, like high desks; scores of them, clustered with men moving all ways, smoking, talking, examining barley and oats spilled from envelopes into their palms, shaking it to level out the seed, scrutinizing it, pouring it back into the envelopes, then spilling it on their left palms once more. What did it mean? One man I watched took a small instrument,

opened a sliding metal cover, shook barley kernels into it then closed it with pressure of the cover back again. Opening it, he examined the cut kernels through a magnifying glass. 'H'm, a bit steely,' I heard him say. 'What do you want for it?' 'Twenty-seven and six,' replied the farmer. The other man shook his head, emptied the cut grains on the floor, closed the cover, put the instrument on the desk. He gave back the paper bag of barley. 'Too much green in it. Only use to me as grinding. I'll give you twenty-two and six.' The farmer went away. I moved after him, and touching him on the arm, asked if he would mind telling me what it had meant. 'They cut the kernels to see the colour,' he replied. 'If it's white, it's a good sample, providing the kernel is plump, like a partridge's breast, and a good colour, and wrinkled, indicating ripeness. If it cuts greyish, what we call steely, it means too much nitrogen. You mustn't have your land too rich for barley, you see.'

'Oh. Can you tell me what makes a good malting sample, please?'

'Regularity of growth and ripening. Much depends on the weather; and, of course, a proper seed-bed. You see, what the maltsters want is a sample which sprouts evenly when they damp it on the malting-house floor, then there is no wastage. An uneven sample means a mixed sample, mixed ripenings, some good, others green or unripe. You've got to cut just the right moment, too.'

I thanked him, and moved along the close-set stands. Manure merchants, insurance agents, seed merchants, representatives of famous breweries, were there, some with small attaché cases half-filled with envelopes of samples they had bought. I saw my informant trying to sell his sample to another merchant; but after he had refused an offer of twenty-three shillings, 'I'll wait a week or two,' he grinned to me, putting the packet in his overcoat pocket.

At the top end of the Hall I met a man who was a manager of a big farm in mid-Norfolk. He had come to see me once or twice, having read some articles I had written in a newspaper, and offered his advice. He seemed to know everything, and I had found myself unable to take in most of what he said. His idea of what I should do on the farm was so different from

my plan, that I could not reconcile the two ideas. Thus he had said to me, 'Don't buy any bullocks, there is no money in fattening them nowadays. It costs nine shillings a week, usually for a period of twenty weeks, to fat a beast nowadays. But you've got to get rid of your roots and hay somehow, also to tread your straw into muck, so take my advice and have agisted beasts. The owner gets them fattened, and you get the muck—meat for manners, as they say.' Agisted, he explained, was to have someone else's bullocks, generally a dealer's, and feed them for a fixed sum a week, about 3s. 6d. or 4s. a head. Cake would be supplied by the owner of the bullocks. All you do is to look after them, and get your agist money, and the muck. At least you are sure of 3s. 6d. per head per week, provided he pays of course; there's always that risk in farming, of a man going broke or not paying; whereas if you try and fat your own beasts, you'll probably lose, even with the Government subsidy.

He was against sheep on the Castle Hills. 'Mutton will probably drop in price, too. There's all the world for the big meat-combines to buy from, Argentine, Australia, New Zealand. The English farmer can't compete. Calf rearing? I tried it for two years, and lost money. Drain your meadows? It will cost you hundreds of pounds, and you'll never get it back in the value of the grass turned into beef or mutton. You might try pigs, they will pay. You've got a job to get this place in order, economically, but I think you've got the ability, but it will be a question of if you can stick it. You find the men difficult? Every farmer does. It's the hardest part of farming.'

Despite his advice, I bought the ten bullocks. If I had a fixed idea, I had to set it to work; I was built that way. I wanted to *start*, to do something; and without reasoning it out, knew I had to buy my experience.

I needed barley seed for sixty acres. Being short of capital, I had been advised to grow that acreage the first year. The advice came from a young official of the Norfolk Agricultural Station. At my request, he had come to look over the farm for me during the previous summer. He was a young Devonian, the son of a farmer who, I learnt, had farmed near Loetitia's old home. It was one of the happiest walks over the farm I had had,

and from the first I felt sure that he knew the land as the sun, the rain, and the crops knew it. If only such a man were my partner, I thought. His words had the economy of natural growth. He did not make the mistake, as a less sensitive man might have done, of assuming that I knew nothing. He took samples of the soil of each field, with trowel and little cloth bag, and answered simple questions with simplicity, not complicity. As an example of the expert knowledge and service county advisory stations are giving free to farmers, here is a copy of the report after his visit.

30th July 1937.

Further to my visit to your farm the other day, I am herewith summarizing the main points of our conversation concerning the provisional programme of the cropping and stocking of the farm for the coming year.

Hilly Piece—20 acres. As this field is at present undersown with permanent grass, which is not looking very promising, it would be advisable to defer any decision concerning its treatment until after harvest, when it would be possible to see whether the 'seeds' are likely to develop into a permanent pasture.

Fourteen Acres. This field would be admirably suited for barley in 1938; after the roots have been carted off, I would suggest that you should plough this field and it would probably be satisfactory to leave it then until the spring, when the necessary cultivations for barley sowing would be carried out. A seed bed application of the following fertilizers would be advisable, provided none of the roots are folded with sheep on the same land:

2 cwt.	per acre	superphosphate
1 cwt.	„	30 per cent potash salts
1 cwt.	„	sulphate of ammonia.

If you follow the normal procedure of the neighbourhood it would be advisable to undersow the barley with a temporary seeds mixture of clover and grasses to provide the hay crop in 1939.

Twenty-one Acres. In view of the predominance of ryegrass on this field it would be inadvisable to attempt to grow wheat, because of the grave risk of attack by frit fly. Alternatively, therefore, you could grow sugar beet or spring barley. Either of these should be satisfactory with suitable treatment in respect of cultivations and manuring. The field is admirably situated near the road for sugar beet carting, but I would call your attention to the fact that if you decide to grow beet

it will probably mean that either Fox Covert or Hang High will have to grow a succession of three barley crops before they in turn can be cropped with roots, bearing in mind that it will be difficult and indeed inadvisable for you to attempt more than a maximum of about 20 acres of roots per year. If, however, you decide to grow barley on this field, it should prove satisfactory, even if you adhere to your intention of applying a dressing of sewage sludge this autumn, but the application of additional farmyard manure would certainly not be necessary.

Fox Covert—20 acres. If this field is not cropped with roots it should be quite suitable for barley, providing it received seed bed application of 4 cwt. per acre of the same mixture as on Fourteen Acres. Presumably it would then be cropped with roots in 1939.

Hang High—22 acres. I am afraid there is no alternative but to crop this again with barley in 1938, when it should receive the same dressing of artificials as on Fourteen Acres.

With regard to the manuring of the root crop, in addition to the application of farmyard manure or sewage sludge, a comparatively heavy dressing of artificials is justified. The following mixture should be satisfactory.

3 cwt.	per acre	superphosphate
2 cwt.	„	30 per cent potash salts
3 cwt.	„	nitrate of soda.

8 cwt. per acre of this mixture would be justified for sugar beet or marrow stem kale, but the quantities could be reduced to 5 cwt. per acre for mangolds.

With regard to the introduction of livestock on to the farm, I am afraid your adherence to the idea of carrying a small herd of 4 to 5 cows only for the time being may lead to a considerable surplus of roots during this coming winter. Consequently if you still do not see your way clear to building up a herd of 20 to 25 cows, I think it would be advisable to obtain further stock to consume these roots. The buying of a bunch of young heifers for the ultimate enlargement of the herd, in perhaps a year's time, is a possible solution to the difficulty and would no doubt prove far more satisfactory financially than attempting to fatten bullocks.

I shall be pleased to know whether you are likely to renovate the cowshed to accommodate a herd for hand milking or whether you prefer to introduce a milking machine outfit. Before you commence any definite work of reconstruction or alteration to these premises I would strongly advise you to submit your scheme of alterations for

approval by the Sanitary Inspector of the district, particularly as you would no doubt wish ultimately to produce milk under the accredited or Tuberculin Tested licence. The granting of Tuberculin Tested licences is dealt with directly by the County Medical Officer of Health and it would therefore be advisable for you to proceed with a scheme which would subsequently meet with his approval.

In the Corn Hall on Saturday afternoon I met an acquaintance of the market place, and he kindly offered to introduce me to a firm of merchants by a stand in the middle of the hall. I had made up my mind to crop the five fields as follows:

Hilly Piece, with its complete failure of permanent grass, a bare-fallow to kill the weeds.

Fourteen Acres, Barley, with small seeds for 1939 hay.

Twenty-one Acres, Oats 7 acres, barley 14.

Fox Covert, Barley with small seeds in 10 acres north; roots in 10 acres south.

Hang High, Barley, and clover mixture for ploughing-in next year.

This would mean 60 acres of barley, though some of it would be sown on land which had grown barley the previous season. I did not like doing it, but the heavy expenditure on the cottages had taken half of my capital.

The merchant showed me a sample of seed barley he had just bought, he told me. He shook it into the palm of his hand, holding it for me to inspect. I pretended to be examining it, whilst wondering what to say. Then I observed a seed amongst them which was longer and thinner than the barley grains, and covered with hair.

'I see you've spotted a wild white oat, sir. There are just a few here and there. We'll dress them all out, of course.'

I remembered from a lecture I had heard about weeds, that the wild oat was a bad thing to get on the land, as it ripened before other corn, and shed its seeds for another year in the stubble. There were enough weeds already without buying any.

'How much is it?'

'How much, sir? Er, just a moment.'

He consulted his partner. 'Delivered to you, sir, at the farm, twenty-seven and six a coombe. We've got just the amount you want, forty-five coombe, for sixty acres.'

I pretended to examine it again. 'Spratt Archer yields a good sample usually, which the brewers like.'

'I'll buy it, then; but on condition it is perfectly clean.'

'You don't have to worry about that, sir. It shall be done.'

'Good. Now I want twenty-four acres of small seeds.'

'For hay, sir, usual mixture suiting the district? Our No. 1 mixture is what you require. Ten pounds Perennial rye-grass, three pounds finest English Red Clover, two pounds single-cut Cowgrass. Seven shillings and threepence the acre. Twenty-four acres you said. Right, the order's booked! Delivery at the farm—I have your address already.'

After thinking this over, I returned to the merchants' desk. 'I think I'll sow some different seeds in the top field, the Hang High. I read in the *Stockbreeder* that a farmer in Bedfordshire brought back fertility quickly with White Clover. The Hang High, my steward tells me, had wheat in 1934, barley in 1935, sugar beet in 1936, and barley again last year—all without any muck. Now it's going into barley again this season. I think I'll sow seeds in it, for ploughing in 1938, autumn, as I shan't have the new road made along the side of Hilly Piece, that steep thistly field, by then. So I won't be able to cart any muck up there.'

The merchant took out a notebook and pencil, murmuring 'I'll work out a mixture for you.' Then he gave me a piece of paper with the following written on it:

Single-cut Cowgrass	2 lbs.
Alsike	2 lbs.
Ryegrass (not Italian)	7 lbs.
Red Suckling	2 lbs.
Trefoil	4 lbs.
White Clover	2 lbs.
	<hr/>
	19 lbs. per acre

He calculated a minute. 'This will cost you thirteen shilling an acre. How many acres?'

'Twenty-one.'

'Right. The order's booked. We'll deliver to farm. Give us a chance to buy your barley, won't you, sir?'

'I will.' The details were entered in my *Farmer's Diary*.

We said good-bye, and I walked out of the hall, almost with a sense of exultation and freedom. I had got that done.

Chapter Twenty-eight

ALL IS EXPERIENCE



THE autumn before I had bought twenty pullets at an auction, four shillings and threepence each, and had got nineteen of them home. While packing them into a crate, one had escaped, and a gipsy boy of about seven years had at once chased and snatched it and stuffed it into the crate behind his father's dilapidated car. I saw him do it; but when I got to the car, such a volume of self-defensive propaganda met me that I thought it best to retire lest a writ for libel and defamation of character be issued against me; or worse, a black eye. While the words of righteous indignation from father, mother, uncle and boy assailed me, every effort was being made to get the car started; and when it did, they drove bumpily away, clouds of blue smoke obscuring my white hen packed with others in the crate on the carrier.

On the way home I bought a sack of mixed corn, and having already bought some houses, set one up in the weedy paddock outside the granary. The pullets began to lay in the second week of November, and Ann noted over six hundred eggs in her neatly kept book by Christmas, when Loetitia took them over.

We bought an incubator at a sale, and four turkey poults, as the hen birds were called, and one stag-bird, in February. Loetitia was to look after them. I read in the *Stockbreeder* about the value of inoculating the young birds against a liver-disease which had given turkey-rearing a bad name; and in Norwich one Saturday, when we went to market, we bought a hypodermic needle and serum. The cost would be about a halfpenny a bird, and the big vein at the elbow of the wing was the place to inject.

Slowly our farm was getting together; but I found no satisfaction in what little was achieved. The repairs had been done by contract; new creosoted gates and posts stood where before the wreckage of broken wood lay half-hidden in nettles. I had an uneasy feeling that most of the labour for these repairs would have to be paid by me. Once I had suggested to Mr. Barkway that I should do the repairs myself, but he had replied that if I did this, it might be argued that the work was amateurish, and therefore would cost more than if done by a contractor. Yet the putting-in of posts and the hanging of each gate had cost about £1 in labour, by contract; whereas I and two men had done this work in half a day, at a cost of 6s.

Mr. Barkway paid another visit to the farm, this time to assess the claim for deterioration of the land. He saw the wretchedly small thistly straw-stack from Hilly Piece, and advised burning; making a note to claim for its value. Also a claim for over-cropping, saying that in the Schedule made by Mr. Stubberfield, Hilly Piece had been listed as Layer, or permanent grass. We walked once more round the fields and meadows. The Arbitrator would, he considered, award a sum about equal to that of the Ingoing Covenants, which was £285. The compensation for Disturbance, £100, was offset already for the year's rent that was owing, he said.

'I read in the *Stockbreeder* that a claim for compensation for disturbance can be made only if the rent is paid up promptly when the tenant quits,' I said. 'The rent is not paid up, it is three months overdue. The Agricultural Holdings Act of Nineteen-twenty-three is clear about that point. Surely we don't have to pay away a year's rent?'

'It was arranged between Stubberfield and myself that the rent and compensation for disturbance should cancel one another,' replied Mr. Barkway. He said that the next step was to wait until they had appointed an Arbitrator, who would hear both sides of the case, and then decide. His decision was final. I learned that I must be represented by a Solicitor, as well as by himself as Valuer, at the Court of Arbitration. Should he get in touch with my London solicitors; or would I prefer a local man? I thought of the slow London and North Eastern Railway service, and Mr. Marjoribanks spending two days in coming

and returning; and if there were any more expenses, I might have to have an auction before I began farming, to pay them. I thanked Mr. Barkway for his suggestion, and said I would let him know.

Meanwhile life in the new cottages was not easy for Loetitia. When I returned after a long, cold day's ploughing, the small box-like room, with its dusty concrete floor, with one soiled coconut mat laid across it, gave no feeling of home. The washing-up was done in a bowl against the wall, on one of the Jacobean oak antique tables I had bought with such exuberance following the literary success of the decade before. Splashes were visible on the wall, and down the table legs. Children's toys, books, hats, boots, and clothes lay about. The plaster of the new walls was cracked; the small cupboard doors by the hearth still bore the accumulated finger touches of previous tenancies. One day, coming home very weary, I refused food, and set about scrubbing them, with the feeling of a criminal who must remove traces of his crime. The feeling of failure always beset me when I was in that poor little room. The creative spirit of life was not in it.

It was time to fetch the seed barley. It had been sent at my request to a warehouse at Great Wordingham, for dressing against a disease called Stinking Bunt. By rotating the seed in a drum with a salt of mercury, each grain became covered with a fine dust which was poisonous to any fungus spores which might be lodging in the wrinkles of its skin.

Riding in the lorry beside Bob, and his old terrier Spot (who was having the ride as a treat) I felt satisfaction that I was going to fetch my first seed for the farm, made free from weed and disease by the care and precision of science. We drove to the warehouse, a modern building with many filled sacks standing neatly in rows, and wooden chutes and drums and slides between the floors. As we were hauling the first sack off a trolley with silent rubber wheels, the manager came from the office and said:

'I suppose you know it is not clean seed? There's a lot of wild oat in it.'

'Really? But the people I bought it from said they would clean it before dispatching.'

He opened a sack, and dipped his hand into it. 'There's one, there's another, there's another. It's a difficult weed to dress out. You see, it goes through the riddle with the barley. There's a lot of tail in the seed, too.'

He dipped his hand again, and spread the seed, pushing a small dwarfed kernel aside. 'That would only produce mouse-eared stuff.'

'Like breeding from congenital cripples?'

'Exactly.'

'Isn't it possible to get the oat out?'

'I believe there's a dressing machine which works on the principle of velvet-covered bands moving up an incline, off which the barley is shaken, but the oat clings, with its angular hairs. It's a German invention; but we haven't got a machine here. The best we can do is to try and blow the oat out: it's lighter than the barley: but we can't guarantee a clean sample afterwards. One or two are bound to remain. Also, it will blow the mercury powder off the seed.'

'Well, I seem to be buying my experience, in the classic manner. How much does the mercury treatment cost?'

'One shilling and sixpence a coombe; forty coombe, three pounds.'

'How much will it cost to blow out the oat?'

'I'll do it for ninepence a sack—thirty shillings in all. Some of the seed will be lost, most of it tail, though.'

'That's advisable, isn't it?'

He nodded.

'Right, thank you, will you do it? I'll deduct the cost, and also the loss by weight. You'll send me a statement, and do it soon, then I'll come again for it?'

'Right you are, sir. It will be ready to-morrow evening.'

So Bob, Spot, and I drove home the way we had come, through the decaying, medieval, narrow-street'd town and so to the long lane through the arable fields, brownish-purple in the low sunset; over the water-splash marked Unbridged Ford, and past other fields until we descended the hill and came to our own farm entrance.

Two days later I drove that way again, this time alone, and brought back two tons, twenty sacks, and returned along my

new road into the cart-shed, feeling almost a farmer. Not all of the wild oats were blown out, but the Norwich firm which had sold the seed had agreed to pay for the cost of cleaning, reluctantly. At first their spokesman had expressed surprise, but I wasn't going to give way, as I had a hundred times and more already in my life, through sympathy with the 'little man' who was trying to earn a living. I was firm this time: I was a farmer. The merchant had not agreed to bear the cost of cleaning the seed without attempting to avoid it. At first he had offered to allow sixpence an acre for 'rogueing' the weed. I asked what this was, and learned it meant a man or men walking through the corn, and pulling off the wild-oat sprays or awns, which rose higher than the barley.

'But surely this will mean the barley being trodden down?'

'Not if your men are careful.'

'Surely the stalks will grow very close together, and treading them down will be unavoidable?'

At my persistence he sighed, and raised his eyebrows, as though to show his extreme patience with a rather tiresome customer who had bought a very little seed. 'Look here, sir, all we get out of this deal is sixpence a coombe. I assure you that such a little amount of oat, as was in the sample we sold you, would be disregarded by ninety-nine farmers out of a hundred.'

'Well, I must be the hundredth, I'm afraid. Here's the report of the cleaning. Dressings, blown out stuff, comes to one coombe, ten stones, four pounds. Additional loss is twenty-three pounds. This may be the mercury powder. I relied on your word, you know.'

He took another line. 'Look here, sir, we don't want to fall out on such a little matter. We want your custom another season. Look, we'll buy your barley, oat or no oat, next winter. Now, what do you consider fair, for the dressings? You say what you'll give us for them. We are in your hands!'

This was awkward. I knew the dressings were mostly wild oat, little barley kernels, and grey mercury powder. They were good for nothing.

'They can be washed, and fed to hens, you know, sir.'

'But they might poison the hens. Really, I don't want them.'

'Nor do we, sir. Name your own price, sir.'

I felt my resistance gone. Weakly I heard myself saying, 'Twenty shillings a coombe.'

'Right you are. And we'd esteem a chance of buying your barley next harvest.'

Outside the Corn Hall I felt I had been silly to pay £10 a ton for rubbish; but I was tired, and had offered to buy them out of superciliousness, while inwardly furious with the petty-bourgeois persistence of the fellow. Buy my barley, would he? What for? Five bob a coombe, including the wild oats in it?

It was now time to make the seed-bed on Twenty-one Acres. The olland, or hay aftermath, had been ploughed under in January. No rain or frost had disturbed the furrows; but the land had no clay in it, and would break down nicely. It was a dark loose soil, but not so 'light' or 'scald' as that of the derelict heaths to the west, which in places were now set with fir plantations. 'Scald' was a word used by Bob, when in the previous summer he had pointed to some of the thin grass on the Castle Hills near our camp. It was withered through the heat. There was about an acre of scald land on Twenty-one Acres, near the hedge shutting it off from the hills, light sandy colour. The field sloped steeply just there, to a small valley or trough, before rising sharply to a miniature cliff of whitish clay, out of which grew blackthorns and elms, making the boundary hedge of the next farm. I had an idea of digging some of that whitey-yellow clay or loam, which grew nothing, said Bob—about half an acre of it—and mixing it with the scald land up above. It gave me pleasure to think of a marriage between those barren earths producing fine crops. I had noticed during the camping days of 1937's summer that fine, strong-looking thistles and docks had grown on that concrete-hard white land. There was nourishment in it. One day, I said, it would mingle with the sand above and stiffen it, as the great Coke had dug his marl-pits in the eighteenth century, and spread the stuff on his scald fields. Bob, however, had doubts, and did not share my enthusiasm. Hares and pheasants lived in the weedy wilderness; I longed to take the tractor there, and leave rows of deep furrows for the sun to bake and the frost to crumble.

The next afternoon I took the lorry to bring back the rib-

roll, which had been made up with a new axle and tractor hitch from the wheels which I had bought from the diddecoys. (The name is probably a corruption from 'didecai'; one day, when I have leisure again, I will read Borrow.) It needed five men to haul and push it up oak planks into the lorry. It was six feet wide, and had four new wheels to make up that length. They had cost eighteen shillings each, where the wheels I had bought cost two shillings.

I thought the weight too much for the light Ferguson tractor to draw up the steep slopes of Twenty-one Acres north end, and all of Hilly Piece; but as usual, I had given way to expert opinion. The implement dealer, who made the rubber-tyred tumbrils (£37 each) suggested that anything less than six feet in width would be uneconomical for a tractor to pull. Most rib-rolls drawn by tractors, he said, were wider than six feet, and in addition they drew wing-rolls, hitched to the ends of the roller frame, covering an area of eighteen feet all in. Had he experience of a Ferguson tractor, I inquired. No, he replied, but you will find it will pull six feet easily, if it doesn't, it can't be much good. I had doubted his judgement at this point, but had given way.

And now, as I went round Fourteen Acres in second gear, I cursed myself once again for allowing myself to be persuaded by others. The field dipped near the oak wood which bounded its northern side, and the soil there was light with gravel and sand. I tried to draw the roll up the saucer-like dip, and at once the tractor wheels began to dig themselves in. This was on an incline of about 1 in 8; and the patch of soil was particularly light just there: even so, I wished I had been firm about my idea, and had the roll made narrower, especially when I thought of the very steep land of Hilly Piece.

It was the same with the tumbrils, excellent carts, but too heavy for the hilly land. They were nine feet long, and were supposed to give a 'full tip', the order had been given him on that understanding; yet when Bob had tried to shoot a load of mangolds from one, they had not slidden off. All had to be hauled off by a hand-fork. Why were the tumbrils built so massively, I had wondered. They must have weighed more than half a ton each. The old-time carts on iron wheels had to

stand heavy jolts; but pneumatic tyres absorbed most of the shocks on bad roads. Our roads, too, were good; and would remain good, with no iron wheels to cut them up.

I could see that if I wanted original or adapted implements in future, I must work out all the details myself. Experience could only be gained by experiment.

'We won't be in no muddle,' said Bob. We had got out the green trailer, which when empty could be pulled round and wheeled about by one man easily, and taken up the muck with it in fifty loads. The idea of spreading the muck on Hilly Piece was to grow roots, on the advice of a farming expert; but later my doubts had returned, after hearing what some of the older village people had said about the field. It was the worst field in the district on which to get a seed-bed. One day it would be too slippery to work, the next day it would be too dry. In the old days it was always autumn-ploughed, for the frost to break up; then six or seven teams of horses should start to cultivate it, and get the nineteen acres of it finished in one day—the right day. It had never been known to grow mangolds, or wheat. So when the muck had been spread, I decided to leave it there, and plough it later, and kill the thistles by bare-fallow. All the ammonia in the muck would be wasted, I knew: and I cursed myself yet once more for not sticking to my original plan—a bare fallow.

As I went round Fourteen Acres, drawing the rib-roll at $2\frac{1}{4}$ miles an hour, I began to see where all the advice I had had was leading me—away from myself. By always listening to others, I was crippling my natural judgement, frustrating my will. It had been the same in the writing of books; I had had to struggle with nearly everyone I knew in order to write them the way I felt and conceived them. In future, I told myself, I'd not compromise about my ideas; and looking over my shoulder, because the tractor was digging in, I saw the twenty-four cast-iron wheels of the roll locked together, and the earth being pushed before them. The heat of friction had made them expand, and they were solid on the new axle, despite the grease in the hub-caps.

In my present frame of mind, this seemed a minor disaster. No rain had fallen for several weeks, and the clods of the two acres of stiff land, near the road, were already hard. Bob had

drawn the cultivator through the furrows a fortnight since, though at the time it had seemed to me wrong to do this without rolling immediately afterwards, to crumble the clods while they are moist and 'docile'.

'You don't have to worry,' said Bob. 'After a rain, when we put the harrows through them, then the one-horse roll, you'll see a lovely seed-bed.'

'But supposing the rain doesn't come? It's already exceptionally dry for the time of year.'

'Ooh, rain'll come. We shan't be in no muddle.'

I still had no idea of how the one-horse roll acted; or why it was different from a two-horse roll, or a three-horse roll (which was a rib-roll, of the kind I had hitched to the tractor).

It was just after four o'clock, and men from the next farm were cycling home to the village. One got off his bike, seeing me trying to scoop armfuls of earth from before the roll, and asked if he could help. I explained that the wheels were not properly fitted to the axle, and were immovable.

'A new roll is always tight,' he explained. 'When it cools down you'll be able to get going, and the wheels will soon cut themselves free. It's a nice thing you've got there, and the barley will feel the benefit of it on your olland. You'll never regret buying that one, I'll warrant!'

He mounted his bicycle and coasted away downhill. I cleared the soil away, started the tractor, and went on round the field. Bob astride Blossom was leading Gilbert home along the new road, after harrowing Twenty-one Acres; and Loetitia, pushing a go-cart with Richard sitting in it, was coming up the hill with my tea-bag. Afterwards I went on with my work, finishing the field at half-past ten, in moonlight, and went home, and tried to write an article, but was too tired.

Chapter Twenty-nine

THE OATS GO IN



On March the 2nd, a fine day, Bob and Norman drilled seven acres of the Twenty-one with oats. I had bought these in Norwich, at another place, for 7s. the bushel, or 28s. a coombe, and brought them home in my brown trailer, which had been made out of an old Crossley front-axle in Devon. It was the best of our three trailers, and could travel at 50 m.p.h. without any sway or feeling that it was behind. (This speed was seldom used, and then only on good straight roads with little other traffic passing.) By bringing the oats myself, I saved 5s., which paid for the journey to Norwich.

It was a good seed-bed. The rib-roll had put the furrows down tight, and the spikes of our new rank harrows had dragged and shaken the fine, warm tilth into the gaps and air-spaces under the surface, so that the roots would not 'hang', but find the 'mother' without check. The 'mother' was the goodness of the olland, the decaying fibres of grass and clover, which would nourish the living plants.

Bob was pleased with the harrows made to his order by the village blacksmith, who was also the Clerk to the Parish Council, and a teacher in the Chapel Sunday School. He was a mild-spoken, honest man, with pale face and dark hair—Norman type—and worked in the forge with his younger brother. The harrows were in two pieces, each four foot square, of wrought iron, to be dragged at a slight diagonal behind our pair of horses, while the recurved teeth or tines, with their sharp points, dug into and dragged at the ground already loosened by the bigger teeth of the tractor-drawn cultivator. The olland on Twenty-one Acres had not been cultivated, as Bob said the

'flag', or grass of the down-turned sod, must not be brought up, but kept down to rot. After rib-rolling, he had used the rank harrows, first following the line of the furrows, then going 'overthwart' or across. The result was a seed-bed in which you could draw the toe of your boot and feel it 'all come up lovely', in Bob's words.

'Blast, there'll be a crop on here, you'll get twenty coombe an acre. I ploughed a ten-inch furrow with the tractor, putting the docks and thistles down, you won't see them no more.' Pause. 'You know, I like that new tractor, a boy could drive it. But I don't think it will be any good on Hilly Piece. It's a bad old land, blast, I could kill six hosses on there, easy, if I was hard-hearted. That old pair of hosses I had used to sweat, and stand still every other yard.'

'Well, you said once that nothing could beat horses for ploughing up there. You've changed your opinion?'

'No, I haven't,' he replied, hurriedly. 'But that I'm afraid that little old tractor won't make a job of it. I know, you know, I don't just say anything. I've seen other tractors, stronger than that, just scrap and dig themselves almost out of sight.'

'Well, you'll see.'

Bob and Norman had put in the oats, and were going home. Rooks on the ash-tree in the hedge were waiting for them to depart. I shouted at the birds, but they were wise; they knew more about farming than I did. They just waited for me to disappear.

I walked beside Bob as he piloted home the Ferguson and the new drill, which was designed to sow anything from large beans to the tiny brown and yellow clover seeds, which were smaller than the sweets called Hundreds and Thousands in the village shop windows. It was an American drill, costing nearly £50, and sowed twenty-three rows or drills at a time, each $4\frac{3}{4}$ inches apart. It had arrived with a pole for horse-drawing, but I had had a tractor hitch made to replace it. On rubber-tyred wheels, which were £45 extra, our tractor could drill in top gear on level ground, at four miles per hour. 'I like this patent,' said Bob, appreciatively.

'How about those rooks? Won't they take the corn? Shouldn't it be harrowed in?'

'They'll take some, no doubt. But 'tis leaving-off time, and I'm tired, though I'll stay if you order me to.'

'No, I'll do it. I'll hitch the harrows to the tow-bar of the Silver Eagle, and get it done in no time.'

Bob stopped the engine and got off to help me wind the chain round the bar, and then to hitch the light zigzag seed-harrows to their 'pulling tree'. I started off, and soon was doing twenty miles an hour in second gear, the engine revving almost flat-out. After twice up and down the field, I stopped, to hear a subdued bubbling thunder in the radiator and to see steam blown from the vent-pipe. There was no fan behind the radiator to draw cold air through the comb, since the car had been designed for speed, and not for transport. I waited for it to cool down, then went across the dark brown earth again, slower, while the rooks watched from the treetop. One old bird with a white face dipped and cawed, as though derisively. 'Yer'll larn,' it seemed to be cawing. 'Yer'll larn!' The water was boiling again, though not so violently, and I stopped to let it cool.

'You won't beat hosses for that job,' was Bob's parting remark, shouted over the hedge, as he covered the drill with its canvas.

'Yer'll larn!' croaked the old rook.

That night I read the chapter in *The Chronicles of Clay Farm* where the chronicler describes his difficulties with the drainer of forty years' 'experience'; and I began to see why some philosophers, lovers of the truth, declared there was no such thing as progress.

Chapter Thirty

THE FIRST BARLEY



I finished the harrowing, then went home in the dusk. Next morning, early, I watched with satisfaction the tractor drawing the green trailer laden with the barley seed, in ten sacks, for drilling on the remaining fourteen acres. It was a Saturday, and Loetitia was coming to take Bob's place on the drill at midday. Then Ann was coming at half-past three, to relieve Loetitia, who had the hens and children to attend to. I felt that at last the farm was beginning to work according to plan.

I was beginning to know and love the pale sun of East Anglia, and the clear, remote sky over the pine-trees. The West Country sun was lusty, the skies were big and wide and strong with colour, the wind from off the Atlantic blew with ocean's power and made a man small yet exhilarated as he met the wet draughts and held himself against them: it was Wind, a giant element: but three hundred miles took from it the rain-clouds of its sea-god's strength: it was but air in motion, bodiless, without meaning. The Winds which ruled in East Anglia came with the spirit of Polar icefields, the blank breath of elemental lifelessness, bitter and frustrate amidst magnetic storms and zones of coloured light glowing to the very stars. So one night, soon after Christmas, we had seen them from the cottage door, and had come out to stare and wonder, the children speaking in whispers and asking what they meant, and Robert saying that God was moving in the heavens, and the lights were coming from His eyes. A marvellous moment, transcending all the differences and problems and worries of the petty material life; giving to a man a sense of freedom, and then of truth, that 'the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life'.

There was no ice-wind to-day, no bracing will-affirming wind to meet as a worthy opponent after the mental dust of words and figures and the petty competitive cleverness called business. It was the authentic pale sun and wan sky of East Anglia, a little shrill, like the language it had made, a little blank, and simple, like the human character it had created in those men who worked with their bodies on its earth, and did not go to the market place. It was nearer to me than the fuller air and light and greenery of the rain-rich seaboard of Devon and the West. Here was no mystic fertility of the Celt; but a simple Nordic straitness. The gods were not dark and homeless; but clear, direct, and strong. And with a feeling of joy, of being in the authentic flow of life, I filled the measure with seed, and poured it, true golden wealth, into the hopper of the drill. At last I was sowing my own corn!

Bob drove the tractor, I walked behind the drill. My job was to watch the twenty-three streams of seed falling down pipes into the hollow iron shoes which were dragging through the seed-bed. I carried a stick in my hand, with an iron tip to it, to free any coulter—as the shoes were called—which might get clogged by bits of dried grass or earth. The seed drill was a simple affair; you poured the seed into the wide, narrow box on top, shut the lid, lifted the lever which let the coulters into the soil, the tractor driver let in his clutch, and away it went. The wheels of the drill turned cogs which made iron fingers in the seed box revolve slowly over the spillway pipes; the corn dropped down into the lines being scored by the twenty-three shoes below. Round the field we went, sowing the headlands, on which we would be turning as we crossed and recrossed later. Four times round the hedges we went. Bob driving on the line of the marker, an iron bar which scratched a line in the earth to guide the driver next time round.

The seed-bed was so well made that none of the coulters got clogged; and I proposed driving the tractor faster, in top gear, while Bob sat on the seed-box of the drill. We tried this once across the field, at about four miles an hour, and Bob said the seed was sowing evenly. 'Blast, I like this patent,' he muttered. 'That's twice as quick as the ould hosses.'

A sack of seed soon went. Bob had set one every fifty yards

down the hedge. He heaved upright the two-hundredweight mass—unfastened the green string round its mouth, and putting his arms about the heavy sack, levered it with his knees against the rim of the galvanized-iron bushel measure, so that the rim pressed against the side, controlling the rush of grain lest it overspill. It was a strong iron measure, with two handles, and the best I could buy in Norwich, to last twenty years. After the way they had had to eke out with shoddy tools and implements, I wanted to provide the best equipment for the men. This was one of my minor mistakes: for they were not ready to receive them. Less than eighteen months later my fine new measure had thirty-seven dints in it, each from a different blow, and also it had been crushed out of shape, the metal warped and broken; and when I asked how it had come to that condition, nobody knew. The mental fear and diffuseness of the village mind, unassisted in childhood by school or church or chapel, and maintained in later life by dread of being without work, was symbolized in my seed-measure.

Before we had brought up the seed-sacks that morning, the tractor had drawn two tons of fertilizer, in hundredweight sacks, neatly loaded in the green trailer, up the new road and on to the field. I did not like 'artificials', but had bought them on the advice of the County Agricultural Station. Having no distributor, and being short of time and experience I had decided to buy the stuff in ready-mixed, granular form, easy to broadcast by hand. The only firm which sold it like this was an international chemical company which marketed its goods with considerable advertising. Their barley fertilizer cost £11 10s. a ton, nearly double the price of the unmixed ingredients; and part of their advertising claimed that their granular fertilizer was 'double strength'. Three and a half hundredweight an acre would cost about £2. I bought it reluctantly, regarding it as whisky taken by some writers in order to do their work: a habit which eventually finished the writer.

First the sacks were thrown off by Norman, standing behind in the green trailer. I had bought a galvanized can called a 'seedlip', for hitching over the shoulder on a canvas sling. About thirty pounds of fertilizer were carried in a seedlip. It was white,

like hail. Norman walked across the field, casting every few steps a saucer full with a sweeping motion of the elbow of his right arm. Each casting hung a momentary white peacock's-tail in the air.

I noticed, however, that each time the slippery saucer was lifted from the curved tin, about an ounce of the white grains dropped directly below, by his right foot. Where it fell, the barley would come up thick and green, and perhaps with different kernels in the ear. This would spoil the uniformity of the 'sample', I suggested to Bob; but he said the coulter of the drill, and later the harrows, would scatter it. Nevertheless, I made a mental note to have rough wooden scoops made for another year.

All the morning we went across the field, sowing our barley. The sun shone, the south wind blew. I saw the first wheatear standing on the dark earth, pausing before flitting on twenty yards, to pause again, as though unable to believe that it was home again on its native soil, after the long migrating flight across the sea. The field was steaming slightly, the sunshine pouring down to wake the wintry sleep of earth. The engine ran smoothly, without effort. What thought and struggle had gone to its creation! Everything was going well on my farm, and for the moment I could relax, dream myself into the spring, the warmth and blessing of the sun, loll on the iron seat with closed eyes, and forget the hundreds of mental pictures of work half-finished, the mistakes, the endless striving, the ceaseless urge to improve and do better and build-up. For a while now I could breathe deeply of the blue-stained air of youth, and share the thoughtless life of the wheatear.

At midday Bob went home, and Loetitia came up with the luncheon haversack. We sat on sacks under the hedge and ate our food, afterwards starting the engine, filling the seed-trough, and driving on across the field. She soon learned to stop at the headland, for me to hop off the drill and lift the lever which withdrew the coulter from the loose earth, before driving round in a semi-circle over the sown land by the hedge and coming round once more and waiting while the coulter was dropped again, the marker flipped out, and away across the field. When I grew tired of seeing to the drill, she took my place

and I hopped on to the tractor and the rubber tyres took us effortlessly across to the distant hedge.

Then Ann came, and I got off the tractor, telling them to sow the field themselves. They smiled at each other, as though with apprehension at the responsibility, so to relieve them of the critical eye, I walked away, to where Bob was harrowing the seed with Blossom and Gilbert, a ragged self-made fag in his mouth. Bob bought two ounces of shag tobacco every week, and rolled his own cigarettes. He never bought more than two ounces. This was his only vice; he never went into a pub, and always refused a glass of beer. Once when he had used his expletive of 'Blast', he remarked that he ought not to have said it, that his grandfather wouldn't like to hear him swearing.

It was a happy day, and we went home as the sun was setting. The green labels of the corn-stacks were fixed on sticks stuck into the field, to keep the rooks away; but the next morning, when I went up to look at our work, the birds were busily digging up what had been hidden from them. They knew enough to dig along the drills. I yelled at them, but they went on digging. The old sentinel bird in the tree knew the difference between a stick and a gun.

'Yer'll larn!' he cawed. 'Yer'll larn!'

Chapter Thirty-one

THE DAY'S WORK



For weeks now the sun had been shining over the farm, and the fields were dry. Every morning at 6.45 a.m. I awakened to see a clear sky through the enlarged southern window of my cottage window. I had seen the same clear sky for nearly a hundred mornings since Christmas. Would it ever rain again? Would those furrows on the Fox Covert field ever cease to be brown brick-hard strips? We could not draw the flat steel fingers of the cultivator through them until the land softened; and time for barley sowing was getting short. The seed barley was waiting in sacks in the kitchen below, safe from the rats which swarmed in the farm buildings. We had had no time to trap, ferret, gas, or poison them.

My day's work was usually the same. At 7.30 a.m. I shaved and washed, then downstairs to a quick breakfast of porridge, brown bread, raisins, apples, marmalade. At 7.45 a.m. I cycled to the farm premises, nearly half a mile away. In the yards one-eyed Billy was at work, turning the handle of the root-shredder. (Note made to buy a pulley to fit on the idle concrete-mixer engine.) Already he had carried, in wicker-baskets slung on a hay-fork, forty bushels of chopped hay and mangolds to the bullock bins in the yards. Forty times 40 pounds equals 1,600 pounds. Old Billy's face was running with sweat. Sometimes he paused, straightened his back, gave a pull at his neck-cloth, uttered a very human curse on the 1902 shredder, and bent to work again. (I *must* get the power-pulley fitted.)

Twenty-One Acres ought to be rolled, said Bob. That field, green with barley, was over-run, or under-run, with moles. Hundreds of moles. The new barley was turning yellow,

because the tender rootlets were drying out, where the soil was lifted. That field must be rolled. Only the tractor could pull the heavy rib-roll, to consolidate the bed. I must remember to get some mole traps. Who could set them? I used to be able to do it. Ah, but I ought to write an article, to pay for next week's wages and housekeeping. The overdraft at the bank was mounting up.

The sick bullock in the yard was no better. My amateur idea of treating that bullock like a human being, wrapping it in sacks, giving it warm milky food, at first dismissed because it was not local practice, had now been used. It needed, however, a visit from the veterinary surgeon before it was done. I had not the authority before, because I knew nothing about farming: so I had given way to 'experience'. Gone were Billy's charms and objects of cure—the pail of cold water, the heap of earth to lick, the untouched lumps of turnip in the box. The beast now stood in a box of the empty cowhouse, wrapped in sacks, its chest rubbed with embrocation. It was too ill to drink the warm gruel in the pail. I held its head and massaged its throat, while the yardsmen poured, from a bottle, a mixture of warm milk, eggs, oatmeal, and whisky down its throat. We were apprehensive lest some of the liquid be poured into its lungs. The vet. thought it had pleurisy.

When it was doctored, I looked at the beasts in the yards. There were twenty agisted bullocks in the main yards. They belonged to a dealer. I was fattening them for him, for 4s. a head per week. Every week the dealer brought some ragged sacks filled with a mixture of barley meal and crushed sunflower seeds pressed into slabs. One-tenth of this cake was supposed to fall from the beast, to enrich the muck. That was my profit from the transaction, for the 4s. weekly would not pay the cost of the hay and roots eaten by each beast in that time. The rich muck would, in a year's time, arise again as wheat or barley, and then as phosphates and carbo-hydrates be sent down the sewers to the sea, and be lost to the soil of England.

'Tis the eighth day to-day,' said Billy, rubbing the neck of the sick bullock. 'Poor little thing, he'll take a turn one way or t'other to-night. I'll be up all night with him to-night.' The

bullock stood there apathetically, while Billy scratched its neck.

And now, what to do with myself for the day? There was so much to do, that I could not settle where to start. I was beginning to realize that Bob had a fatalist aspect of arable cultivations. Week after week he had prophesied rain, which would enable us to work down the hard furrows of Fox Covert; but none had come. The point troubling me was not the delay in the rain's arrival: but that we should have allowed ourselves to be dependent on rain to make a seed-bed. I felt that the cultivations to break up the furrows and clods into a fine consistent tilth, or seed-bed, should have been done before the furrows *could* dry out and harden into rock-like strips.

Meanwhile, the period when the furrows might have been rendered down into a nice loose mould was past. What to do? I felt small, insignificant, without authority. Only experience could give that authority.

Should I try the heavy rib-roll on those hard brown slices of Fox Covert furrows? Or should I plough Hilly Piece, where the spread muck was dry and brittle as seaweed above an old tide-line. Also, I must remember to buy mangold and turnip seeds. And to get broody hens for our turkey eggs. And coops. And make farrowing pens for the three in-pig pedigree Large White gilts I had bought at an auction the previous week.

Oh lord, and I had forgotten that the well before the cottages was due to be cleaned. It had been dud for more than six months. A legacy of partnership days, that dud pump. I remembered asking dear old Sam to get the blacksmith to fit a new piston before we started building, but Sam had, unknown to me, made another plan. The plan had been that Sam should repair the pump. After some digging, and hauling up of rusty iron-work, Sam had taken off the old leather washer, examined it carefully, renailed it to the old wooden piston, lowered the rusty ironwork into the dark watery cavern again, put the flat stone in place once more, and covered it up. Building had started the next day, and when water was needed, lo! the pump sighed and wheezed, but no water came. It had to be primed with a pailful fetched from the Turnip Arms, before it would spout; but as soon as one ceased to work the arm, the pump

sighed and gurgled and belched, and when the next water was needed, the priming had to be done all over again.

There was no time to get it done once the building was started. I begged Sam to see that no gravel went down with the priming water; but of course it happened that someone primed it with a bucket containing grit, and that was the end of our water-supply.

Hundreds of pailfuls had to be carried from the Turnip Arms, fifty yards away. When Sam packed up to go to another job in November, the cottages only half done, the pump was still useless, and we had to fetch all domestic water by pail. Now, at last it was going to be done.

I had told the blacksmith brothers, who had been going to do it ever since Christmas, that I would connect up the new two-stroke engine and piston-pump to a rubber tube, to suck out the water. It was already 8 a.m., and they might be waiting. Hurriedly I loaded pump and engine into the Silver Eagle (looking muddy and battered, alas, like many another farmer's car, used for all purposes) and took them to the cottages. Fortunately the blacksmith brothers understood engines and pumps, and with relief I could leave them to it.

Having ordered the seed, and asked someone to inquire for me about broody hens, I returned to the farm, free to plough. By noon I had ploughed about $1\frac{1}{2}$ acres. The stubble was hard, the gradient steep; but the light super-steel Ferguson tractor, with its twin-furrow hydraulic-operated plough, went up with only the least 'scrapping' on the loose, chalky places of the steepest bits—1 in 3 gradient. Over my right shoulder, I took pleasure in watching the breasts turning in the thistles, tearing the pale yellow roots, grating over the chalky pan never ploughed so deeply before in the field's history. It was like summer on the hill, pale blue sky and blue sea, trees misted green with opening buds, larks singing, peewits diving and soughing over the weedy waste.

Gradually I forgot the mass of things undone and half-done, the mass of manuscripts and notes, the accounts and the bills, the never-ending details confronting a would-be reflective or relaxing mind. I had not been able to meditate for over a year: seldom a free mental moment for reflection. It was like being

a new boy back at school, in addition to being also a new headmaster without any scholarship or training, only his native wit, which most people believed to be witless. But now I was escaping: the clean, fine new furrows on either side of me, the joyful new companionship of a perfect engineering job, and the thought that I was doing good.

Soon after noon, my lunch bag arrived, lugged over the white-turned chalk by little Margaret. We sat down on a sack together, and I read my morning's mail. How fatuous most of it was! A young man in Chicago wanted to know if my literary works could be regarded as a synthesis of moral endeavour, or did I write for fame, and if so did it spring from a complex, and if not, did I write for money. He said he was addressing his queries to all the famous writers of Europe and America. His letter was promptly laid in the furrow. It would rot down for humus.

The R.S.P.C.A. asked the author of *Tarka the Otter* to help them to reply to a member who sought their advice about the 'most humane way of destroying otters'. Had the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals read *Tarka*, I wondered? Perhaps some earnest humanitarian in Jerusalem had asked Pilate about the most humane way of destroying Christians? That letter was put in the furrow also. A share-pushing organization wanted to sell me shares; the only shares I am interested in are plough-shares, so that went in the furrow. Someone wanted a job on the farm. He said he would do anything, work for just his keep, if only he could escape from a London office. This kind of letter came by every post. I replied to all of them: I was a small working farmer, and had no accommodation for them; no organization. One day Britain would satisfy the land-hunger of its urban civilization; but only after great suffering, when the system which produced a soft and crafty people (outside its manual workers) would disintegrate. A letter about the proposed Richard Jefferies-Alfred Williams memorial on Liddington Hill, near Swindon. Poor Jefferies, poor Williams—lonely men, born before their time, voices crying in the wilderness against a gross, commercial materialism. A letter about the non-payment of tithe. An exciting letter from the B.B.C. approving an idea for broadcast talks. Thank God, some

money to come in! Several bills, including one of £164 for the repairs to buildings and erection of gates. A letter from Devon—and immediately I heard the dipper singing on the mossy stones, while the March Brown creeper shed its skin by the stream-side, and crawled out as a long brown fly to skate and skid across the river, when *splash, splish, plop!* one of my tame trout in the pool had taken it. Were the kingfishers still lancing in blue and green over the bubble-breaking shallows, passing under the bridge with sudden keen whistle?

Lying on the warm dry chalky loam, with eyes closed, I thought backwards into time, until stopped by the inevitable nothingness; and so entered the present. Up the hill again, and start the engine, and on again, the tractor bucking and grating as the shares strike on great white flints laid there by the sea millions of years before. At 5 p.m. I am suddenly cold and weary, and return to the farm premises, to re-fuel and grease tractor, log up its hours and work, look round at the new in-pig gilts (young sows) recently bought; at the bullocks; the turkeys (old gobbler spreading, colouring, strutting, puffing); at the hens. The two Rhode Island cocks fighting as usual, one with comb all bloody. Shout at them, without avail, and cycle home on wobbly-wheeled bicycle (traded from Sam for a pair of toe-pinching hand-made shoes, relic of the literary boom years).

Such was a typical day on the farm during the first year. It was seldom that a day passed without exasperation on my part: the weeds, the rat-holes, the immense amount of work to be done before the place would begin to look cared-for, wholesome, and friendly, beautiful. Not for my sake, not for profit, directly: but for its own sake, for England's sake. I fear this confession will not be understood; but since this book is one man's testimony, it is so written.

While I was washing, before the high-tea at 5.30 p.m., a telephone message came that the nine in-calf heifers and yearling bullocks, from Ireland, would arrive at Whelk station at 8.30 p.m. that night. Could I arrange to collect them? Yes, I would fetch them.

At 8.15 p.m. Loetitia drove Bob and myself to Whelk in the Silver Eagle, and then returned home. The cattle were at a siding, in a truck. At 8.45 p.m. Bob and I left the station yard

with them, with two lanterns, I leading, he following. It was a dark night, only the stars and our swinging lights to show us the way. I walked a hundred yards ahead, to warn any cars coming by waving my lantern. It was quiet, along the narrow winding road, except for patter of hooves behind me. 'Keep you a-going, all right this end,' shouted Bob from behind. Every gateway by every field along the highway appeared to be open; some spaces were gateless, in others the gates were broken or off their hinges. Only one out of twenty was shut. Bob kept on chasing the cattle out of the fields. 'I'll get them out!' I heard his frequent shout behind, by the wavy lamp. 'Keep you a-going with that lanthorn well in front!'

The shadows of my legs were like great scissors on the hedge. Suddenly a car approached, round a bend. I waved the lantern. Bullocks ran past me. I shouted, ran, yelled. The car seemed to have no brakes. Indeed, the car had no brakes. In the headlights I saw two heifers down, before a sound of smashing glass, and in the dim sidelights a steaming-askew radiator. The cattle scramble up; stampede. No anger, too tired for that; just numbers, names and addresses taken. Bob chased the little herd over a barley field—'Keep you a-going, sir'—got them together, counted. Fourteen—all there. Were they all right? One horn was broken and bloody. On again, in darkness and stars. We got them to the Home Meadow at 10.30 p.m., passing through the gate on the top bar of which five turkeys were roosting, gently alarmed, but continuing to perch. I stroked one, she didn't stir, except for a very subduedly anxious movement of her head. We counted the beasts again; and yet again. Bob said all were there; I thought two were missing. We would leave them until the morning.

As I went home, I saw a light in the cowhouse. Old Billy was there, kneeling on the straw, trying to persuade the sick bullock to swallow a mixture of whisky and eggs out of a beer-bottle. It was the last thing we could do. 'He'll make or break to-night,' said Billy. 'Poor little old beast.'

At six-thirty next morning I went down to the Home Meadow and counted the new arrivals—four brown shorthorns supposedly in-calf to an Aberdeen-Angus bull; five strawberry roan heifers; and five Aberdeen-Angus bullocks. One of the

in-calf heifers had a bloody, broken horn. Otherwise she seemed all right.

Lying in the straw of the calf-house was the bullock, dead. I rang up the knackers at Great Wordingham, and they sent a lorry with hauling tackle and lugged the corpse on, and paid me a pound for it—my first sale off the farm. Later I learned that the heart and lungs of the bullock had almost been dissolved by tuberculosis. I thought I would buy my own cattle in future—at least I couldn't do worse than the experts.

About a week afterwards a letter from a leading insurance company informed me that 'my cows had damaged the motor-car of their Insured'. Truly it was a strange world, that of Business.

And every morning, between 7 a.m. and 8 a.m., Bob the steward said to me, 'You don't have to worry. We shan't be in no muddle. Rain'll come soon.'

And my reply, 'That's fine. I'll take the lorry up to the mangold pie, and bring home a load of roots.' Or 'I'll creosote the coops for the hens, for the turkey eggs.'

Or, 'I'll take Jimmy to the flintpit to-day, and we'll get on with road-making'—with a glance at the idle tractor standing in the hovel. Hilly Piece was now too hard to plough. If only we had ploughed it in the autumn, for the frost to crumble and revitalize! But we were building those cottages, and making the concrete yards.

Ten sacks of seed barley, weighing a ton, had been in my cottage kitchen for more than six weeks. Thirty sacks of granular fertilizer, mixture of phosphates, potash, and ammonia, and weighing in all 30 cwt., had been standing in the hovel, beside the tractor. The barley seed cost £14, the 'artificial' cost £16.

If the ton of barley had stood in the hovel during the six weeks, the sacks by now would have been torn and sagging, with yellow grain scattered on the chalk-rammed floor. Rats would have eaten and spoiled more than a third.

When would the rain come? The Fox Covert field lay on high ground, with a fine view towards the Wash; medium brown land, as good as any in the district. It grew, in a good season, the best 'malting sample' of barley—for the finest pale

ales. It was ploughed late, in January, by contract, for 9s. an acre. And ever since we had been waiting to make a seed-bed of the furrows and to drill our barley.

I walked up to the field. The furrows were brick-hard. The hardest kick with my boot did not affect them. Even weeds couldn't sprout on them. It was April the 21st—almost the deadline for drilling. Seed sown after this date probably would not ripen, in a normal Norfolk summer; not for a malting sample, anyway.

Then there was the field below Fox Covert—Hilly Piece, on which we had spread our valuation manure. One-third of the field remained unploughed. For two seasons it was undersown with 'small seeds'—rye-grass, clover, alsike, trefoil—and the crop failed. You can't grow seeds on a hard surface merely rutted by the poorest of ploughing, behind half-starved horses.

The chalky furrows of Hilly Piece glared in the sun. Small hard black shot-like seed lay in the upturned furrows: charlock seed, lying dormant since the years before the Great War, when bullocks ploughed the land: perhaps lying there for more than a century, and now ready to germinate as soon as the rain should come. The immense power of life lay inside the black round seeds, linked with the power of the sun in the sky. The oil in the rind of the charlock seed had preserved the germ of life during the years underground.

The plough-shattered flints of Hilly Piece stared with blank faces, blackly, at the shining steel of the shares which had defeated them. The sun shone serenely overhead, the larks sang above their nests.

Pheasants began to lay at the end of March. The hawthorn's white buds were breaking on April the 10th. In the hard, leg-jarring furrows of Fox Covert, lapwings sat on their blackish-brown mottled eggs.

'When rain comes, Bob, we'll pick them up before the tractor, and set them down again, for the bird to brood.'

'That's what we usually do, sir.' His reply made me happy.

Jimmy, who has lived fifty-five years in the village, told me that his father said to him on Sunday, when he went to pay him a visit, that he had never known such a dry spring in all his eighty-three years.

The pond below the yard was nearly dry. (I must dig out that rich black mud, and spread it on the pastures, with lime to sweeten it.) Barley in Twenty-one Acres field, which was drilled in early March, was turning more yellow, despite the rolling.

When would it rain? 'We shan't be in no muddle,' said Bob, a score of times; but I noticed that his words, meant to reassure an over-anxious beginner like myself, were accompanied by an anxious, almost-drawn expression. He had the feel of the land in his very being; and it was April the 21st, and mangolds should soon be in, the grass-keep of the meadows should be growing fast, making bullock-bite—but everything was stand-still.

And what about my 'small seeds', that should now be sprouting in the barley of Fourteen Acres for hay in two years' time? If only I had acted on my instinct, and sown them on Fourteen Acres when the barley was drilled. Somehow, I knew it was going to be a very dry spring. I *knew* it, but could not prove it, so that impulse was mortified, because I did not trust my intuition.

Chapter Thirty-two

DROUGHT



No rain fell. Barley sown after May Day would not ripen. Something must be done. So the Ferguson went up the steep Hilly Piece, where it was not ploughed, dragging up (just) the 25-cwt. rib-roll. All day the tractor scrapped and bucked and slid, dragging the heavy cast-iron wheels. The field looked like a frozen brown sea afterwards. Then we hitched on the new pitch-pole harrow, which dragged up heavy lumps between the size of coco-nuts and cottage loaves. This rocky seed-bed being useless, we started to plough it in, hoping to find a slightly damp mould beneath. In this we would drill the barley, and after a rain, roll it down to press soil into the air-spaces of the clods beneath. It was the only chance.

Mangolds and swedes were to be drilled in the southern half of the field, and, being now desperate for time, I hired a tractor and driver, for 9s. 6d. an acre. Our new near-silent Ferguson worked behind the black oily Case Tractor, with its worn spuds and stink of half-burnt paraffin oil fumes. The light one-horse roll made a nice tilth of the damp mould, and early on the Saturday morning Bob and I took up the sacks of seed barley in the light green trailer. Then we went back for the drill, and set to work. The last rows were sown by three o'clock of the afternoon, and at five minutes after the hour the parallel lines of the coulter were being obliterated by the worn tines of the second-hand seed harrows pulled by Blossom and Gilbert. It was the last day of April, and so I could tell myself with satisfaction that all my spring corn had been put underground before May.

If only we had a few nights of good soaking rain, or even half a night of steady rain, the barley seed would strike and get away fast into the May sunshine.

I switched off the engine of the tractor and lay down on the loose brown earth, watching the two horses, which had been harrowing-in the barley, sinking below the line of the field, to the farm buildings half a mile away and below. It was warm, windless, at the north end of Fox Covert, close to the wood and the straw-stack of the past winter's thrashing. The trees were a shelter. It was a grand feeling to lie on my back, feeling the hot sun warming me through my dungaree overalls. All I had to do before I went home was to fetch the scarecrow, or malkin as Bob called it, from the adjoining Hang High field. The barley on Hang High was already sprouted.

The rooks did not seem to be scared by the malkin, but that, like the drought, was not my affair. I was a farmer, and farmers had scarecrows, and therefore I had a scarecrow. It was a most realistic figure of a man, bringing back memories of the chalky cornfields of Picardy—although we never thought of them as cornfields—above the Somme. Jimmy had made the malkin of an old faded coat and a pair of grey flannel trousers, stuffed with straw. Its paper face was bleached with the sun; and whenever I had seen it, suddenly, as I had been rolling the Hang High field, it had given me a start. The legs were rounded, as though swelled. It looked like something that had died in that position, in a warning attitude, its arms spread out, its shattered head thrown back. Jimmy had been too realistic. The malkin should have conveyed a sense of the comic. Its clothes should have flapped on it. It should have grinned, with a mangold for face, a pipe, and an old shapeless hat, with hair of hay or straw. It was not a scarecrow; it was a reminder of things that had been forgotten, and were likely to happen again, unless men began to think very differently, with the clarity and logic of genius.

Several times I had set the malkin upright on the Hang High, when the wind had blown it over. Now it was wanted to guard a plover's nest in the middle of the Fox Covert. Five times during the ploughing, the harrowing, the cultivating, the rolling and the drilling, the three eggs had been picked up and set down

again, inside a hollow tripod of three sticks, to scare the jackdaws and gulls which had followed the work.

The male plover had kept guard, swooping at the birds to drive them away, while the hen bird had stood near, running away before the tractor, pretending to pick up seeds and drop them again, always running to lure the monstrous thing from her nest. And each time I had stopped to pick up the eggs to move them from the wheels of the tractor she had flapped into the air and uttered a plaintive cry. It would be a pity if, after a dozen times of picking them up and making a new nest—a slight hollow lined with grasses on the renewed surface—the bird lost her eggs after all.

The field was now level, and its surface gave little protection for the black and brown blotched eggs. Surely, I thought, keen eyes of gull or jackdaw would spot them and the marauder would drop instantly to pick one up and be off with it before the male bird could swoop. That was where Jimmy's malkin would come in useful. Propped on three elderberry sticks ten yards from the nest, and facing the keen east wind with shattered paper face, he would stand on guard until he fell flat. By that time the mother would be back on her nest, and without the distraction of myself, the two birds would be able to guard the eggs.

The first egg laid in the nest had been taken by a crow; therefore after the male bird had kept proper watch. The hen lapwing, feeling something missing when she pressed thighs and wings against only three eggs, had chosen a small clod of earth to replace the lost egg. Once I had removed this clod twelve inches from the eggs, but she had found it, and pushed it back into place with her beak.

Having set up the malkin, I started the tractor engine and rolled away on rubber tyres to the distant gap in the hedge. At the bottom of the next field, called Hilly Piece, I unhitched the drill and covered it with a green canvas cover, first stuffing up the bulge in the end of the lid which covered the seed-box. We could not discover why this bulge had been left there. It seemed quite unnecessary, especially as a rat had found this way into the hundredweight or so of barley left in the box three weeks ago. That rat had lived there during that time, and grown so fat that

he had had to gnaw the paint off the iron of the lid before he could squeeze himself out. How he had found that bulge, I know not, but he had certainly found it. And why the McCormick Company made it like that, I know not either. The rat had eaten and spoiled nearly half a hundredweight of barley, or eight shillings' worth, during those three weeks of the drill's idleness.

Musing thus carelessly, I thought that the rat, had he the wit and industry to follow the wheel marks for seven hundred odd yards, would have to gnaw through ten thicknesses of sack before he had his next taste of the barley in that box.

What to do with the rest of the afternoon? It seemed silly to break off work, with so much to be done, just because it was Saturday afternoon. Beyond work there seemed nothing at all in life. Far away in the harbour behind the sandhills of the ternery, a score of white sails were taut in the wind—14-foot dinghies in a club race. I had seen some of the slim and polished cedar-wood shells passing between the dingy walls of the village riding on trailers drawn by cars in which sat happy young people without hats on their blond heads. The little 11-foot blue sailing dinghy was still in the barn, waiting to breast its first wavelets of the North Sea. But what about those letters that must go off? There were the papers for the ejectment of the old gardener, who was still living in the double cottage that was to have been our farmhouse six months ago. But I was tired of papers, and it could be done the next morning. What to do? Go to the ternery on the Point, and watch the birds? One day I would sail there in the blue dinghy, and get back again into the old happy-careless days of early Devon: in say four years' time, when the farm was in order.

Then I remembered that the barley in Fourteen Acres needed rolling. Five days before, Jimmy had broadcast the grass and clover seeds for next year's hay, among the plants of the barley, and these Bob had harrowed in with the light seed-harrows. This harrowing had loosened the earth around the barley plants, and if the earth were not rolled, to pack the soil tightly round the plants, the drought would draw up moisture which the leaflets badly needed. So up the hill I went again, hitching the

heavy rib-roll to the towing bar, and down the hill again in top gear, the roller following smoothly behind.

The sense of power was pleasant as the tractor purred up the grass of the other slope, drawing the ton roller easily and lightly on the big rubber-wheels. Up in Fourteen Acres the wind blew keenly. It was a late ice wind, a penetrating diffuse chilling wind, but it did not worry me. The cold winds of the Norfolk coast in spring were always exhilarating. I wore a thick Canadian mackinaw jacket over a very heavy double wool jersey of the kind worn by fishermen working off the cod-banks of Newfoundland, and under that a black-and-white hunting shirt. Even with three pairs of trousers covered by overalls the wind was piercing. It found my body up the sleeves of the coat, and cut across my cheeks, scooping tears from my eyes. It was a grand wind, while the sun shone down from a blue sky, without a rag of cloud anywhere. It was good to watch the earth being pressed under the twenty-eight pointed wheels of the roller, each turning independently on the common axle, and to watch twenty-eight new parallel lines drawing out farther and farther behind as I moved along the hedge towards the fence of wire and concrete posts bordering the distant road.

I was a farmer. All my corn was sown. There were five pheasants in the middle of the field, and a hare. The leaves on the hedge looked very new and green, the tractor engine was running harmoniously. I found myself singing, at my good fortune to be a farmer, and the owner of such a beautiful farm. In that moment dream and reality were one.

Towards the end of the second week of May, when the nightingale's voice, shrill in the East Anglian winds, was coming from the osier bed on the Home Meadow, the rain fell. Jimmy, Billy, and I were putting in a gatepost at the top end of the field of old grass, called Spong Breck, when the first drop touched the back of my hand. For many nights I had heard on the wireless about depressions over Iceland, and Windles at school in North Devon had written saying it had been drizzling for days. But on these uplands overlooking the North Sea, three hundreds of miles from the lush Devon valleys, the sun

was still shining, the dry east winds still blowing down the coast. All the moisture of the Atlantic clouds seemed to have condensed and fallen; or been sent higher by the brittle currents of east wind whitening the tops of waves in the dull sea. 'Wish there'd be a tempest,' said Billy, as he rammed chalk around the base of the oak post. Pausing in the tumping old Billy drew himself up and addressed me in one of his periodical little lectures—'Ah, that were a tempest we had in nineteen-twelve, sir. The river ran through the yards and took all the muck out through the sluices, and half the soil of the fields too. That was when the gulley was cut deep, six feet and more, down the Castle hills. I've heard these antiquitarians say it was dug by the Danes when they were scrapping the Saxons in the Dark Ages, but 'tis a lot of squit, that were dug by the tempest in nineteen-twelve, and I'll face any society or debating club on the matter,' declared Billy, staring righteously with his one eye—and then returning to his chalk ramming.

I too remembered that tempest, for it broke out of the sombre August sky one morning soon after my arrival at the fishing village a dozen miles eastwards along the coast. Rain had begun to pour down about breakfast time. After breakfast I left Mrs. Apps' cottage, where I was staying with my mother and sisters, and walked inland, with my Brownie camera, to photograph a moorhen's nest in a pond. When I got there, my boots were squelching with rain-water which had run down my mackintosh and through my stockings. I stood at the edge of the pond, wondering if I dare wade into that lashing water, and if I did, would I sink into the mud and never be seen again; and if I didn't, would the photograph be any good in such a dull light. The sky was fearfully dark. The pond was much bigger than it had been the previous afternoon. I was too scared to wade in, and returned home, to find the gutters of the main street racing with water.

All the morning it rained. I got tired of playing so many games of draughts and dominoes with my sisters. About mid-day a beach friend came to see me, barefooted. He said the water was up to his knees. I went out, and saw that the village street was like a West Country brook. The cottage gutters were cascades. Sacks were being pushed against the lower parts of

closed doors. I had changed my clothes once, and the second lot were wet through within a minute of going out. The rain fell on my shoulders as though pailfuls were being emptied over us. It was dangerous to stand in the street. Flints and gravel knocked against our legs. We waded with difficulty across the road, and went towards the sea. The gulley we usually went through to bathe, yellow gravelly sides, was now a great torn valley, rocking with flood waters. On the beach, fishermen were trying to haul away boats half-filled with clay sludge.

The rain stopped in the afternoon. Mrs. Apps said that Norwich was under water. So were miles of roads, including the main road to London. When I cycled back a fortnight later, some of the roads were stony as though they had been ploughed.

But to-day the rain fell in no tempest fashion; it was the warm rain of the south-west wind sprinkling itself over the dry fields with delicacy. It was so winsome and slight that, holding out the palm of the hand, it seemed not to be wet after a quarter of a minute. But as we worked at the post, I began to feel a clamminess on the back of my woollen shirt. My hair, too, when I touched it, was surprisingly wet. How the blackbirds were whistling! The trills of the nightingales came through the beeches of the Entries Wood. My boots slipped on the wet clay. When the gate was hung, and brace, bit, and spanner put in the rush-bag, I was glad to leave and get home, to change boots and clothes.

Looking out of the rickety, ill-hung Elizabethan lattice of my bedroom window, with its view of the Baptist Chapel roof, I combed my matted hair, and watched with satisfaction the uniform slow drippings from the pantiles on to the flower-beds below. It was not easy to see the rain; but listening intently, I could hear it falling everywhere. It was a warm rain, and although it had not got more than an inch into the soil, it seemed that the lettuces and cabbage plants were already grown bigger.

It was queer to be wearing a raincoat again. I went out to dinner, and afterwards we sat by the fire, the window wide open as always. The rain had stopped? We listened. Yes, the slight sound still continued: a subdued general noise of those small sensitive drops touching leaves, branches, tiles, the gravel of the new road, grass-blades and flowers of the garden, the

flints of the wall. It was still falling with sweet feminine insistence when I switched out the reading light by my bed-head just before midnight; and I lay in the darkness, relaxed in the benison of the rain.

In the morning it was still falling, from a bright opaque sky. Blackbirds were busy among the new potatoes, eager for slugs and snails which had been dormant for months. Village faces looked easier, happier. The horse tank by the stables was full, and dribbling over. There were pools in the road; the wheels of passing lorries, taking their tons of stone and gravel for the new anti-aircraft camp at the other end of the village, threw out fans of water. The turkeys, which for weeks had roosted on the hens' houses, under the wide old thorn-trees of the lower farm lane, were bedraggled and stagnant. Why didn't they use the nice straw-topped shelter Jimmy had made for them? I met Bob by the barn, and he said it was too wet to go on the land and roll the barley in Hang High where the clay cobbles had lain for so long, and where, when they were pulverized, we hoped to sow our small seeds for next year's hay and clover. The rib-roll would cake up, said Bob. So would the horse-rolls, which were smooth iron cylinders. We must wait. The more rain, the better, he said. Let it rain for three or four days, we would need it all. He didn't seem at all pleased that the rain had come. Nor, when I thought of it, did I feel any enthusiasm. For one thing, I had not believed it would come, and my mind was set on having the poorest harvest. It would take some time to accustom myself to the effect of the rain, just as the soil would. Had it been a tempest, we would have felt less neutral about it.

Bob's concern now was to find the paint-brushes which I had taken away to clean (and had forgotten), as he wanted to set the men painting the horse-hoe, the hay-rake, and the binder—all ancient machines bought at auctions six months before. There were the beams and collars and rafters of the barn to be creosoted, too. They were pitted with the holes of wood-beetles, and it was time their wooden pastures were poisoned. They were fine beams in the big corn barn, made of the masts of a schooner which might have been sailing the seas when the boy Francis Bacon peered up among the rafters, for white owls roosting there.

'We shan't be in no muddle now,' said Bob. 'I've a-set Father to clean out the pigs as you asked, they'll be littered to satisfy you. I've a-brought in the mare and foal, and set Billy to grind some more mangold for the bullocks. The pig-meal came, and the linseed cake. Spot killed a rat this morning, a great old rat it was too, been a-troubling me for months, in the horses' bing. Go you with an easy mind to London, and do your broadcast, and Father and me will scheme what to do as soon as the rain stops, and we can go on the land. We shan't let you down, don't you worry.'

Chapter Thirty-three

FOREBODING



Now summer had come to the village built beside the narrow straggling road along the valley side. By day and by night motor-cars and lorries passed under the window of my cottage, until I came to dread the slurring noises of wheels approaching, swelling, bursting upon the room, and diminishing, only to be succeeded by other wheels. The barley fields beside the sea, through which Loetitia and Windles and I had sauntered so happily only two summers before, were being ripped up for asphalt roads, bestrewn with heaps of wood and iron, while white lines of tents already were extended across them. Abruptly the quiet little Turnip Arms, where sometimes at night I had sat and listened to the talk, or watched the dart-players, had become a mass of khaki uniforms, songs, and shouts. The beautiful and desolate marshes, where the sea-lavender was coming to flower, were out of bounds. Salvoes of shells from anti-aircraft gun practice made white spurts along the edge of the sea. The black hut, with its notice of FISH and CHIPS, FRYING FRIDAYS, in the garden across the narrow road, opposite my window, became a night club for the more lively of the soldiers. They were Territorials, and came for a fortnight only. The midnight accents of Limehouse gave way to the dialect of Glasgow, and then to Sheffield; but all sang the same songs of the Jewish jazz-bands; all used the same adjective the printing of which caused the banning of the evangelical *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. With hoarse and explodent regularity it arose with the odour of coal smoke, frying fat, and the shrill east wind tones of some of the village women. The village street was raucous with songs and shouts by night, and eddying

with bits of greasy paper by day—until the road-cleaner gathered them up. I became used to part-eaten parcels of fish-and-chips being dumped over the garden wall. One evening some blue-and-red uniformed City of London Yeomen with jingling spurs and shoulder chains paid the hut a visit, arriving in an old Grand Prix 4½ litre Bentley, and loudly calling for ‘the best in the house’. A moment or two later, after perfunctory but pungent criticism, I heard the familiar *whoosh! plump! bump! wump!* as their packages sailed over the wall. In a fury I ran out in my dressing-gown, collected the loose and sprawling packets from among my salad-onions, folded them up, and walking into the glare of the open hut (which was lately lit by electricity) returned them to the owners, remarking mildly, ‘I think these must be yours’, and putting them in to the hands of an astonished man. Then I went back, and was entering my door when the tall young soldier strode after me, probably, I thought, to punch me in the eye. He brought himself to attention, however, with a jingle of chains and click of spurs, gave me a terrific salute, said, ‘On behalf of the troops, I apologize, sir,’ and strode away. I felt myself to be senior; a year or two ago I would have enjoyed shying the stuff at them from over the wall. I would have enjoyed it now, but did not want to loosen strings of shrill words at me; for the chip-frying woman had already told me to mind my own damned business a week previously when I had asked her if it would be possible to fry on glowing coke, instead of the smokiest coal I had ever smelled. The prevailing wind set from the sheet-iron chimney of the hut towards all our windows, and Loetitia in the top cottage was constantly wiping smuts from the beds, tables, and chest-of-drawers tops. ‘Shut your windows if you don’t like the smoke,’ shouted the woman at me, ‘who d’you think you are, interfering with my business?’

(Were the willow flies and olives hatching from the shadowed alders of the Bray, as it flowed cool and bubble-borne in its gravel bed from Exmoor? Were the sea-trout in the Fireplay Pool by the railway viaduct, and did the bees still nest there, and the honey drip down from nearly two hundred feet?)

The Clerk of the Parish Council, the blacksmith who was also a Chapel Sunday-school teacher, protested to the Camp

Commandant about the nocturnal oaths, and received the reply that if anything was said to the men about it, they would leave after their holiday. Once I walked through the violated barley fields, thinking that perhaps I would find some link with the thoughts of the old Army that often were with me: but I felt only resentment towards the inefficient incinerators, the lines of flapping tents, the litter of paper everywhere and the notice boards PLEASE PUT LITTER IN THE RECEPTACLES PROVIDED beside the near-empty wire baskets. It was a sordid sight, on that once beautiful field.

Excavating machines were ripping up the brown earth and loading it into lorries. This was the soil of the best barley-land in Norfolk, the home of the fine-ale malting barleys . . . and hundreds of tons of it, thousands of tons, were being dumped at the edge of the sea. I asked the lorry drivers who gave the order to dump it there. 'The foreman.' I spoke to the foreman. 'We've got to get rid of the dirt where we can.' I spoke to Higher Authority, who said it was a contract job. I replied that I would pay the extra cost of dumping it on my land; explaining that there were two acres of scald or sandy soil on Twenty-one Acres. 'Or', I said, finding no response in Authority's countenance, 'if it will take too long to run it up on my new road, couldn't it be tipped on the adjoining field, which has a gravelly soil? I will soon get permission from the owner; and the field is uncultivated. It should not be lost,' I stammered, 'it is our heritage, and we are trustees . . .' but I might have been talking to a Board Meeting of some internationally-financed meat combine, which had millions of pounds invested in the Argentine. . . . Rider Haggard, in his book *A Farmer's Year*, published forty years ago, had cried out against the dereliction of Britain's land, and the greater outflow of capital to South America, declaring that Retribution would come to a nation that despoiled its land. He had farmed in Norfolk; but then, as now, nobody had cared.

The lorries ran less than two hundred yards to the dump, and then returned, to await their turn for loading. They were paid 10s. an hour for this work. For 10s. during the previous summer we had dug, and carried half a mile, and spread, four tons of flint and gravel, paying out of this sum for petrol, tax, royalty on material, and the wages of four men.

Some of the labourers who had been on the dole for months or years were enjoying jobs as bricklayers and carpenters at this and other camps and aerodromes in the county. They got 1s. 6d. an hour and more. It was a good thing, for Hodge to me was the salt of the earth, even if at times of exasperation I thought of him through the Norfolk saying, 'Strong in the arm and thick in the head.' The arm had not always been strong, for only recently had the dole been given to out-of-work labourers, largely through the efforts of Lady Sunne, that impatient patriot.

During this time I spoke at several meetings of the party I had joined, in the company of Lady Sunne, Ann, and others. Occasionally we met with hostility, but usually there was indifference. We were voices crying in the wilderness, striving to arouse the public consciousness so that Hodge could have the wages and the cottage he deserved, and his children receive the skilled technical training and prospects so that the migration from the land to the city factories be stopped. It was campaigning for the stopping of foreign sweated industrial competition—financed by British capital—which kept home production and wages at a low level in the cities. The home market should be the first market, we shouted through the loud-speakers, and the investment of British capital in Central Europe, China, and the East to equip new factories to undercut the home factories should be forbidden. The system mis-called democracy, we cried, which every capitalist newspaper praised, was a financial dictatorship: and it was the direct cause of sixteen millions of British people being permanently undernourished, in Sir John Orr's statistics, and unless it were changed many of those sixteen million might soon be fighting on foreign battlefields, for the very system which produced the malnutrition, the slums, the slow decline of agriculture, the sullen class-conflict, the mental fear of the majority of people.

Only the flint-and-brick walls sent the echoes of our words back to us. Nobody cared for Hodge; least of all, Hodge.

A few days later, on a Sunday morning, Margaret came to tell me that a neighbouring farmer's horse had fallen in the

dyke. It looked like to die, said my small daughter. I hurried up the village street and crossed the dirty river to join the crowd in the meadow.

The horse lay in black mud, exhausted. It breathed stertorously. Its belly was swelled, and plastered with ooze. The ooze was thick in the dyke. The dyke was a drain for the meadow—a choked drain. Once it was a good meadow, plenty of good grass. Now it was a mass of creeping buttercup, useless stuff, which overcame the grass when the drainage system decayed, owing to lack of labour, lack of money. Black mud had been accumulating in the dyke for years, a danger to all stock.

The horse got into the slough at 8 a.m. on that Sunday morning. At 12.45 p.m., when I arrived with Margaret, a team of volunteers from the village, uncaring for their Sunday-best clothes, was about to lug the horse out with ropes. Otherwise it would have died, as thousands of mules and horses, and their human friends, had perished in the mud of the battlefields of the Great War.

The place—aptly called Muckledyke—was a danger to all stock. The water was poisonous. It polluted the trout stream, to which it moved imperceptibly. And yet that black mud was potential rich muck, if dug out and re-rotted in a great heap, to heat, before being spread on the arable fields. There was no money for this; it was a mortgaged countryside; hundreds of thousands of acres of arable—once fine, proud corn-bearing land—filled with thistles, docks, and thin barley. A man could walk around many square miles of meadow and marsh, sinking to deeper poverty every year, all for lack of work. And there were nearly two million unemployed, despite the ‘rearmament boom’, as the newspapers called it. The camp was a little part of the boom; the fish-and-chip activity a little part of the prosperity.

There was no leadership in the country. Our great squires were no more. Norfolk still lived on the memory of its Coke of Holkham. When he had succeeded to his land, it was said that on every acre of his sandy, tired soil, two rabbits were fighting over one blade of grass. Squire Coke dug deep pits in his fields, dragging out and spreading hundreds of thousands

of tons of marl—chalky clay—over the surface, for the frost to disintegrate and pulverize.

He reclaimed scores of square miles of salt marsh and mud. He could do this because English fields then fed English people. He became the most famous farmer in Europe. Every year, at his Sheep-shearings, thousands of visitors came to see his farms. In one year 37,000 arrived, and were welcomed by the tall, long-headed, blue-eyed man who could work beside, and outstay, the strongest labourer. His rent-roll increased from about £2,000 a year to £23,000; which meant prosperous farmers, and no unemployment.

How fared Coke of Norfolk's land in this age of canned food, chilled beef, chain-stores, and imminent trade-war clash? During the past February the worst gale for half a century drove the sea inland to the very edge of some of the fields he improved with his noble spirit. I was out in the gale, while geese and duck passed within a few feet over my head. After the storm a heavy riband of marsh litter—seaweed, sea-lavender, sea-blite, marram-grass, and other maritime plants—was left on the verge of the barley fields. The jetsam was from two to ten yards wide and from six inches to three feet deep. As I walked along three miles of Coke's land, I amused myself trying to calculate its weight: this marvellous gift of the storm, delivered to the very edge of the fields, would, if gathered and rotted down with calcium cyanamide, turn into thousands of tumbril-loads of rich humus. The weeds in it, if alive after the salt pickling, would die in the heat of rotting.

I thought how Coke of Norfolk would have exulted to find the stuff cast to the very verge of his fields! I imagined the contentment of present-day farmers if hundreds of bronzed youths, once part of the Sixteen Million, from the classless education camps of a Greater Britain of the future, had come to collect the stuff into heaps, to rot, to be spread and ploughed in during the winter.

A few weeks later, hurrying on foot to Whelk station on my way to a broadcast in London ('Personally we like your stuff, but we don't want Overseas Listeners to feel that farming is in quite such a bad way as you feel it to be'), I walked beside the

three miles of this sea-gift. It was sad to see what had happened to it. Tractor-harrowed, dragged about to dry; and burned. The flames had spread to the furze bushes and near hedges, and I saw, as I walked along, four linnet's nests, each with scorched and dead nestlings.

Chapter Thirty-four

HILLY PIECE



The Old English isolation of the North Norfolk coast was fast disappearing. By day airplanes towed targets over Hilly Piece, Fox Covert and the Hang High; and wheeling over the meadows, drew the white-and-black segments of cloth on steel wires above the line of the coast. Then, high over the dotted tents, black puffs of smoke appeared, each preceded by an up-curving point of fire which traced the trajectory of its shell. Thud—thud—thud—thud—thud—thud—thud; seven splashes along the edge of the blue sea. Round again the airplane droned, its engine-noise amplified by the wood-enclosed air of Hilly Piece, until the tractor seemed to have two engines.

It was summer, and no roots were growing, as intended, on the white and brown segmented soils of Hilly Piece. I had ploughed the valuation dung under the furrows of the later winter, and then those furrows had set hard as lines of over-turned kerbstones. It had seemed disastrous, until I recalled that my original plan had been to bare-fallow this territory of King Thistle. For a time I had abandoned this plan because of advice to grow roots on it, to clean it. I had failed to grow roots on it; I hadn't gone once round the field with rib-roll to crack the furrows before realizing the impossible task. The tractor could not pull the roll up the steep bits.

At midsummer the barley on Fourteen Acres and Twenty-One Acres was tall enough to ripple in the wind that bore the broken voices of cuckoos. The nightingale by Camping Hill was silent; the first young swallows were flying over the gulley down the Castle hills. Young rabbits nibbled at the edges of the nettle patches, and our turkeys were growing in the wire-netted cage.

Bob was horse-hoeing the mangolds and swedes on the south half of Fox Covert, on the other half of which patchy barley was coming up. On Hilly Piece the thistles were thick, strong, and green. They were enjoying the valuation muck; and the unexpected cutting of their roots by the tractor's plough-shares had stimulated them to increase. From each crooked root a dozen white snake-heads had pushed, to explore the moist earth under the furrows and thence to arise as green starlets, which with the rain's aid found the decaying tissues of straw and cotton-cake, putting out gossamer-like rootlets to absorb nitrogen and potash, and arise into the sun with triumph, drawing chlorophyll from the air and storing strength in the roots for another and greater summer. King Thistle had triumphed again—for the moment.

The grey belly of the Ferguson was brushed by a score of forming cardoon clusters as it moved along the top headland one morning towards the end of June. Rabbits rushed away from the purring monster. A lapwing flapped in unfinished arcs over man and machine; the yellow R.A.F. airplane towed the cotton target with a noise of *fraa-a-a-a-a-a-ap* across the sky.

The rain, which nourished the barley and the plants of mangold and swede on Fox Covert beyond the hedge, had softened the furrows, and they broke up behind the twin shares. The depth of the plough was eight inches, kept there by the oil-pump inside the aluminium porpoise-barrel body of the tractor. I went along the top hedge, ploughing on the round, in Bob's term. It gave me satisfaction to watch the off wheel crushing the brambles which were creeping out from the hedge, as though anxious to claim the field from King Thistle. The new furrows turned easily, with a soft shearing sound that was more pleasing than the song of the lark: the new furrows were crumbly, they settled behind the curved silver mouldboards with many cracks, in which showed the cut section of thistle roots. The sappy green stalks were lifted up and turned under, the mould came up sweetly, with streaks of chalk from some pre-twentieth-century chalking, when farmers could afford to be good farmers.

I closed the throttle, and vaulted out of the seat, while the engine ticked over with scarcely the noise of a sewing-machine.

I knelt on the new furrows, lifting a handful of the loamy earth, feeling it run loose and warm through my fingers, sweet with sunshine and the rain. A sudden idea came to me: I would plough all the thistles in and then cultivate with special arrow-shaped shovel-feet on the cultivator tines, thus cutting the roots of the next crop of thistles underground. The thistles would send up more shoots, which I would cut eight inches underground once more; and yet again if necessary, until the root-stocks were exhausted. These creeping thistles drew sustenance from air and earth and stored it in their white roots, which pushed out in all directions.

It was warm in the sun, and I took off my shirt, throwing it over the steel arm of the plough-attachment. Climbing into the seat again, I opened up and went on along the hedge. The field became uneven half-way along its length, rising and falling as though with a mid-Atlantic swell; and the crests of the swell were of whiter, heavier soil, which in a dozen hours would set hard as mortar in the sun: but I was in time, I had 'caught it right', and now the stubborn yellow clay broke up and crumbled to a fine tilth, which covered the thistles and charlock abounding under the hedge. At the end of the summer, I thought, we will drill wheat here, and surprise the village, which declares to a man that 'Hilly Piece will not grow wheat'.

This had puzzled me, until suddenly the explanation came to me, as I was plunging down the 1 in 3 gradient by the Entries Wood. Wheat was usually sown in October in this cold district, and that would mean the field would have to be mucked and ploughed by October. If it were in roots, they would not be lifted and topped in time; if it were an olland, or aftermath of one-year's hay, the ground would be too hard to plough and cultivate in time. But if it were bare-fallowed with the special arrow-head tines, the seed-bed would be ready for the corn, which should be sown before the October rains. It was simple, like all things once they were realized. I would grow wheat on Hilly Piece!

Round and down and up and round again we went, my body growing brown in the sun. I rolled my shorts up my thighs to take more of the vital glow to myself. What a beautiful thing

was this tractor, walking up 1 in 4 gradients, a steel and aluminium grasshopper on wheels!¹ The turns gave no difficulty: all one had to do was to raise the lever controlling the hydraulic gear, and the ploughs lifted themselves out of the earth. At the turn of the field, I put in reverse gear, let in the clutch, and moved slowly backwards until I was in position to go forward again. Then the lever put down to its limit, throttle raised, and we slid forward, the points of the shares pushing down until they found the maximum depth of ten inches. The bottom of the plough scraped on the chalky pan beginning fifty yards off the wood, and left skewbald furrows behind, for the sun to bake and kill the stalks and roots of the thistles sticking out. 'You'll never get rid of these thistles under six years, if then,' a farming expert had pronounced, the autumn before, gazing at the brown stubs dominating the thin little barley stubble, and the masses of grey floss in the sorry stack. I'd show him!

It was a dry month following, but rain came at the end of July; and after the rain, the field was green-starred by the thistle-heads of yet another generation. Those underground creeping roots sent up six starlets for every one that had been reburied.

It cost 10s. an acre; and the value of the nitrogen from the air being put into the soil, at about two hundredweights an acre, was about 40s.

The nine cultivator heads of special design arrived in a sack from Huddersfield, were fitted to the steel arms, and drawn through the furrows eight inches underground. Soon the green starlets were turning brown, then they withered away as though burnt. Once again the root-stocks tried, but this time the heads were very small, as though exhausted; and after one more cultivation, that was the end of them. The field was clean. King Thistle was routed from Hilly Piece.

The exposure of the clods to sun and air charged the land with goodness. The seed-bed for wheat was ready.

¹ The Ferguson tractor is now the Ford-Ferguson.

Chapter Thirty-five

ARBITRATION



The time had come for two unpleasant things: to attend the Court of the Judge of the Eastern Circuit, to plead for the ejection of 'Napoleon' from the double cottages which were to have been our farmhouse; and, at the Kings Arms Hotel in the same market town, to be present at the Court of Arbitration which was finally to settle the controversy between Mr. Barkway and Mr. Stubberfield over the Dilapidations. These two events would end, for me, the period of suspense, hope, and exasperation which had taken part of my vital energy during nearly five hundred days.

After much correspondence it had been agreed that Commander Trelawney should pay the costs of the ejection and give me £25. This sum was to compensate for loss of a year's rent and rates on the house, and also for all the trouble and inconvenience to which we had been put.

During the past year Napoleon had been employed as gardener by the new owner of the Old Castle. This gentleman came to me and said that he was getting a solicitor to act for Napoleon, for the sake of fairness. I told him I had myself thought of asking a lawyer to act for the old fellow; but of course if I did so, it would be interpreted in some parts of the village as a conspiracy.

The day came for the visit to the County Court; and before the Judge arrived Napoleon's solicitor told the Clerk that he had no defence. The Clerk replied that he would ask the Judge to make an order for ejection, within one month. Would that suit me? Yes, I replied, and it was finished.

Having braced myself for an ordeal in Court, with possible unpleasant publicity afterwards, this sudden petering out left me with a feeling of emptiness. So I sat down in Court, to listen to the cases coming before His Honour.

As I sat on the wooden chair, I reflected that this ought to have happened a year before, and what endless bother, even misery, it would have saved! In terms of farming capital alone, the sum lost or absorbed was not far short of one thousand pounds. The Government grant had been forgone; the time taken to recondition the three cottages was six months lost on the plan of the farm. All during the winter the valuation muck in the yards had been washed by rain, thus losing its ammoniacal value; autumn ploughing had been neglected, thus losing the virtue of frost as a regenerating force in tired and ill-cultivated land. Those awful months in the granary, too, would have been avoided; and the dissensions due to nervous exhaustion. Still, I had only myself to blame, for lack of will-power to keep to my plans. Anyway, Napoleon now must quit my house inside a month; and it would be something to look forward to, entering it when empty with Loetitia and the children, and to scheme how to make it comfortable. At least it would be away from the fish-and-chip hut, and there was a big garden, with plenty of room for a cesspit. I would be the only villager who didn't run his drains—if he had them—into the river. There was the Rivers Pollution Act of 1875, which made it an offence to pollute rivers, and there were the Public Health Acts of 1923, all of them disregarded by most of the public bodies of Britain. In about four miles of our local river, between Creek and the next village, there were sixty-six drains pouring their filth into its waters. Some came from the Council houses, which had been built without septic tanks, thus breaking the Council's own by-laws. What a corrupt system, wherein the majority were dodgers of laws made after great struggle by the best British minds!

I listened to the Judge, a small grey-faced man harkening intently to plaintiffs and defendants in the petty cases in dispute before him. A building society wanted ejectment of a couple who could not pay the monthly instalment on their hire-purchase house. They had paid regularly for seven years, and now they were in default. One cow had died, then another cow. It

was too great a loss. Why had the cows died? They did not know. (Yet science had probably known for many years.) Could they pay a little each month? They would try. The Judge ordered small payments to be made each month. He seemed wise and humane in his various questions, remarks, and judgments. I noticed his left hand was perpetually shaking, as though he had had a stroke. His was the labour of a little Sisyphus. Did he ever reflect that in a properly ordered system most if not all of the cases before him would never arise? Or did he accept them as inevitable, each a little variation of the greatest un-understanding in history, when Innocence was destroyed by Ignorance on Golgotha?

With a mixture of hope and trepidation I returned a week later to Great Wordingham, to attend the Court of Arbitration held in an upper room of the Kings Arms Hotel. I sat in a horsehair-covered armchair, trying to feel at ease. Facing me was Mr. Strawless; and then a table, at the top of which sat Mr. Gotobed, partner in one of the leading firms of estate agents. Mr. Gotobed was the Arbitrator. Down the left side of the table sat Mr. Stubberfield, and beside him a lawyer's clerk in a black suit; while on the right side were ranged Mr. Barkway, in his usual well-cut Harris tweed coat, knickerbockers, heather-mixture stockings, and grey canvas shooting anklets above his brown boots. Beside him sat his clerk, the youth who had made the Schedule of Repairs on that wet November day eighteen months ago. Next to him sat a young man who was a partner of Mr. Barkway's solicitor-brother. Mr. Gotobed was smartly dressed too, with cavalry-twill breeches and cloth leggings which reminded me of those worn by the adjutant of the Cambridgeshire Regiment in the early days of 1915. He had been proud of those leggings, I remember, 'cut by Tom Hill': a tall and prematurely portly man, with leggings that made his calves look very thin.

There was a hawk-like look about the Arbitrator which pleased me: he would be scrupulously just.

Mr. Barkway stated his case first. He went straight to the point. 'All Mr. Stubberfield's letters were written to me "without prejudice", so I am afraid I can't read them to you,' he said.

To this Mr. Stubberfield promptly replied, 'Do you wish me to explain why I wrote that?'

'I do not,' said Mr. Barkway. 'The facts are plain and simple. I made numerous offers to Mr. Stubberfield to supply materials during the period December 1936—June 1937. To each and every one of these Mr. Stubberfield was evasive. At last in August I wrote that common courtesy demanded a reply as to what he intended to do. All I got was an admission that the dilapidations could be estimated at a "reasonable sum". When I inquired what was this "reasonable sum", I found there was no reply.

'Finally, I wrote that the continual evasion of my points was tedious. I wrote and asked Mr. Stubberfield this question. Are you going to do the items in my Schedule of Repairs, or are you not? Mr. Stubberfield, after a further lapse of time, replied with the amazing offer of ten pounds for dilapidations, and the second crop of clover on the hayfield for Mr. Williamson to plough in.

'The rest can be briefly told. When the tenancy had lapsed, I got an estimate for the repairs, and advised Mr. Williamson to accept it. The work was done, and I submit that the labour charge for it should offset the charge for Ingoing Covenants, upon which we have already agreed. In the winter I looked over the farm again, and prepared a claim for foul land, undrained meadows, and general deterioration of the farm, which is in a bad state.'

'It was in a bad state when Mr. Strawless took on the farm,' interrupted Mr. Stubberfield.

'I acted for the previous tenant in that matter,' retorted Mr. Barkway, dryly, 'and have here particulars of Mr. Strawless's claim against him. It contains a sum for repair of roads; and I understand that Mr. Strawless did nothing about the roads after receiving the money to repair them. Nor, by all appearances, was anything done to the drains on the meadows, which again were awarded a sum for their cleaning.'

'I did do them,' cried Strawless, from the corner where he sat. His soft country voice held a blend of tones: it was slightly aggressive, mildly indignant, as though he were a schoolboy being accused of something of which he was innocent. Before

the meeting, I had met him outside, and in a friendly talk he had offered his opinion that all arbitrations were a waste of time. 'You'll see, they'll just cut the bloody claim in half.'

'Did you dam the drains with boards, in the proper manner, when you had the grupps dug out?' inquired Mr. Barkway, suddenly.

'Yes, I did,' retorted Strawless, sturdily, adding, 'I spent a lot of money on repairs, one way and another. The farm was badly let-go when I took it over.'

The ritual of arbitration, outwardly fair and just, was based on the principle of English law that both sides did their best to get what they could, making the best of their respective cases, and then accepting the judgement of an impartial judge, who would in Strawless's words, 'cut the bloody claim in two'.

Mr. Barkway's solicitor was now arguing about the liability of Strawless to carry out the repairs to the buildings. He declared that the case was governed by the case of *Payne versus Hain*, which imposed an obligation not only to leave the premises in good tenantable repair, but also to put those buildings in order which were not in such a state at the commencement of the tenancy. Here Mr. Stubberfield interrupted.

'On the contrary, I think we can prove, sir, that this case is governed by *Proudfoot versus Hart*, which with your permission, will now be argued.'

It was legal shuttlecock and battledore. *Hain versus Payne* was tossed against *Proudfoot versus Hart*, and banged back again, with apparent force, but entirely without injury. Then they were talking about penalties for overcropping of corn in 1937, while I recalled that the valuation hay had been cut over-ripe and tough, also left out until entirely bleached by the sun, in order to make its bulk larger and so to attract more money. The horses wouldn't eat it, unless it were cut into chaff.

'I submit, sir, that this case be ruled by the judgement of *Lowther versus Clifford*, alternatively or in conjunction with *Oliver versus Paynter*.'

'On the contrary, sir, *Proudfoot versus Hart* is the obvious precedent, wherein Mr. Justice Cocklecarrot . . .'

The law had to live. Had it not decreed that its barristers be entitled to the affix of *Esquire*? Though most of them knew too much to put their money into land and become real squires. Under British case law—by which all previous judgements in legal history became part of the law—something that had happened in the reign of Henry the First might decide if the bill for the dilapidations, which I owed a local builder, would be paid by me, or by Mr. Stubberfield, out of the great mass of corn which had lain in the barn after threshing the previous winter. The fact that one man had promised, in writing, to keep another man's buildings, which he was using, in proper repair, had nothing to do with it. The legal ivy on the British oak was concerned primarily with its own maintenance.

The builder who had set up the new gateposts and put new rafters and tiles on the rotten roofs was next called. With a somewhat subdued expression, he announced that he had lost money over the job.

'What?' said Mr. Stubberfield, 'when you make a charge of £13 to put in sixteen gate-posts? Usually a hanging post with clapping post will take two men half a day—six shillings. Your charge is over sixteen shillings for each gate.'

I recalled Mr. Barkway's letter, declaring that if I did the repairs myself, I would lay myself open to being an amateur, and therefore less expert and presumably slower than the real workers. I had put in the two posts, in rammed chalk, with old Billy, in four hours, and hung the gate, too. Cost, six shillings, eight hours at ninepence an hour.

'It was very difficult to get the posts over the farm in the wet weather,' said the builder. This was true; for it was done in November, when their lorry had difficulty getting up the slippery fields. When asked about details of other repairs, he said he could not remember. So Mr. Stubberfield promptly suggested that as he was a very busy man, he thought he might be excused. Grabbing his hat, the builder left the room.

They were talking about the sporting rights. Mr. Strawless was saying he could not remember what he got from them, exactly, 'thirty pounds or something like that'. I thought this a moderate estimate, for the game itself in any one season should have fetched that sum, and in addition eight guns at ten

pounds each should not have been an excessive charge; then there was the fishing, four rods let for ten guineas each, according to the hotel manager. However, this was outside the subject of arbitration.

Mr. Barkway was recapitulating his case.

1. Labour on repairs to buildings and gates	£70 15 0
2. Breaking up 40 acres of old grass land	£100 0 0
3. Foul land, fences, ditches, etc.	£118 16 0
4. Repairing roads	£5 0 0
	<hr/>
	£294 11 0

‘This, sir, is my claim, and I hope you will award it!’

Mr. Gotobed, the Arbitrator, then said, ‘No-one can stand me a drink, according to the rules; but there is nothing against me asking you to drink with me, gentlemen.’

We drank his health in beer, and afterwards Mr. Gotobed and Mr. Barkway went into the luncheon room of the Kings Arms, and ate roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, with baked potatoes and cabbage, followed by gooseberry tart and cream, and Stilton cheese. With nearly £1,000 of debts, and possibly more if the Arbitration reduced Mr. Barkway’s claim, I went into the smaller pub across the way and had bread and cheese and pickled onions—home-pickled shallots—and enjoyed it.

Chapter Thirty-six

I FOOT THE BILL



10s. Stamp.

IN THE MATTER of a HOLDING known as OLD CASTLE FARM, CREEK, in the County of Norfolk, lately in the occupation of Mr. Sidney Strawless's Trustee, and owned by Mr. H. W. Williamson of Creek. TO ALL TO WHOM these presents shall come, I, ROBERT GURNEY GOTOBED, Valuer, of Rougemont Chambers, Norwich, send Greeting:

Whereas pursuant to the Arbitration Clause in the Agreement of tenancy . . . ah, that was the loophole, all the rest of the 3,000-word agreement had been mere legal ivy . . . I restrained myself, I would read the thing through, and not turn over the page to see what I had got, or had not got . . . duly appointed under the said agreement to act as arbitrator for the purpose of settling the said difference, questions, and claims . . . NOW KNOW YE that I, the said ROBERT GURNEY GOTOBED . . . AWARD AND DETERMINE . . . the said H. W. Williamson . . . NINETY NINE POUNDS EIGHT SHILLINGS . . . Good heavens, and the draining of the meadows alone would cost three times that amount. . .

I DIRECT AND AWARD that the costs of this award amounting to EIGHT POUNDS EIGHTEEN SHILLINGS shall be paid as to one moiety by the Tenant and as to the other moiety by the Landlord and that each party are to bear their own costs of and incidental to this Arbitration.

IN WITNESS whereof I have set my hand this 10th day of June One thousand nine hundred and thirty-eight.

THE SCHEDULE BEFORE REFERRED TO

	<i>Amount Claimed</i>	<i>Amount Awarded</i>
Premises and Gates, Foul Land, Fences, Ditches, etc. 	£205 14 0	£99 8 0

(ii)

15s. Stamp.

*VALUATION of TENANT RIGHT upon THE OLD CASTLE
FARM, CREEK, Michaelmas 1937*

HAY: 2 long stacks of Mixture.

ROOTS: 1 enclosure contained Mangolds and Swedes.

MANURE: *All the Manure as in heaps.*

CLAIM FOR

*DISTURBANCE: Compensation under the Agricultural Holdings Act,
1923, viz., £100.*

*WE, the undersigned, having made a careful examination
of all the foregoing, do adjudge the value thereof to be the
sum of £385 10s. 3d.*

*THE ARBITRATOR'S AWARD for Dilapidations
having been issued at £99 8s. 0d., the nett amount pay-
able under this Award is TWO HUNDRED AND
£286 2s. 3d. EIGHTY SIX POUNDS TWO SHILLINGS
AND THREEPENCE.*

Dated this 5th day of July 1938

DAPLYN & STUBBERFIELD

Valuers, etc., Whelk, Norfolk.

RICHARD BARKWAY & SONS

Valuers, etc., Bury St. Anselm.

(iii)

H. W. Williamson Esq., in A/c with Richard Barkway & Sons,
Bury St. Anselm.

To Commission of 5 per cent on £50 rent	£2 10 0
To Professional services in connection with the Valuation of Tenant Right and other matters passing from Mr. Straw- less's Trustee to yourself	9 9 0
Paid Half stamp	7 6
To share of Arbitrator's Costs	4 9 0
To preparing Schedule of Repairs and obtaining estimate for same	2 2 0
To Correspondence with the Tithe Redemption Commission obtaining necessary Certificate and eventually a revision of £27 18s. 6d.	1 1 0
To Correspondence with Mr. Strawless's Trustee on the subject of Repairs, Journey to Creek to prepare Claim for Repairs, further considerable Correspondence with yourself and Mr. Stubberfield on the subject of Dilapida- tion, Breach of Agreement and Eventually drawing up a Statement of your case and submitting same for the advice of Solicitors and Correspondence thereon, also drawing up appointment for Arbitrator, attending the Kings Arms Hotel, Great Wordingham, and stating your case before the Arbitrator	12 12 0
To legal fees in connection with Arbitration	5 5 0
	<hr/>
	£37 15 6

(iv)

H. W. Williamson, Esq., in A/c with Bertram Sadd,
Builder, of Great Wordingham,
Repairs to Old Castle Farm, as estimated, Tiles being
supplied by the Estate

£169 15 6

Instead of the forecast of a farm manager coming true, that the old tenant would have to pay me something on top of the value of the roots, hay, and manure, I found that I was further in debt by £488 8s. 3d., besides the cost of draining the neglected meadows, which he had estimated at about £200.

There was only one thing for it: to pay off the debts by writing. In the succeeding six months, while also keeping the books and replying to all correspondence (Ann having gone to live in the West Country) and working most days on the farm, I wrote and delivered, after the day's work, eighteen broadcasts and twenty-two articles, in addition to *The Children of Shallowford*, and thereby managed to pay the money owing to Mr. Stubberfield, Mr. Barkway, and Mr. Sadd. In spring the snipe, uttering their queer throbbing cries, still flew happily over the undrained meadows. I could not bear to hear them.

PART FOUR: REALIZATION

Chapter Thirty-seven

MISFIT



I began to dread walking down the village street every day. It was narrow, and shut in by the dirty walls of decayed cottages. In my ignorance I had hoped to change the spirit of the village, to give hope and enthusiasm where before (I thought) was a half-dullness towards life and work, and no enthusiasm for farming; but now the spirit of the village was changing me. I did not fully realize that I was a foreigner, not a Norfolkman. Who was I to talk about making a success of farming by a new method? Hilly Piece wouldn't grow wheat, everyone knew that; and everyone knew no tractor would do other than scrap and dig itself into the steep slopes there. As for killing lice on sows with old engine oil, why, no-one else did that. So particular about stamping horses, too, everyone knew horses stamped with the itch, it was in the blood. And here the foreigner was, ordering their fetlocks to be clipped on the first of every month, and the legs to be washed with grey ointment, to kill 'mites'. As though there weren't work to be done already, wi'out such theory!

Every day on my way to the farm I passed a road drain outside a cottage, into which the woman poured her slops. Sewage occasionally floated down the river. Crossing the bridge, on the way to the farm, I made a habit of keeping my eyes on the road. When I spoke to the blacksmith about the greasy bars of the road drain, and the general pollution of the once-beautiful little river of England, the good man, who was Clerk to the Parish

Council, gave me a steady look and remarked, 'Isn't human life more valuable than property?' It was unanswerable; all the idealism of the Labour Party and the *Daily Herald* and his readings of the New Testament were behind his honest glance. I wondered what he would have thought if he had owned; beside his village property, a mile or so of the river and therefore had had the incentive to keep the trout and their food as free from disease as he, a careful bee-keeper, kept his score or so of hives. Or supposing it had been the custom to empty the Night Cart over the hedge into his garden, thus fouling his hives, and he had spoken to me about it, what would he have said if I had remarked with solemn righteousness, 'Isn't human life more valuable than property?' I liked the blacksmith, but my small efforts to make friends with him did not succeed; to him, no doubt, I was a selfish capitalist, an enemy of labour, a reactionary, I hadn't seen the light, I was self-willed, eccentric.

Meanwhile I tried not to see the greasy bars of the road-drain as I passed that way, especially when returning tired and dejected from long hours on the tractor. The ditch leading from a neighbouring farmer's cowhouse drains must be avoided, too; for once I had observed a pale flow of disinfectant spreading from it all down the river. Making inquiries, I learned that a drain from the cowhouse had been put in a few years ago, and on the advice of the District Council's Sanitary Inspector, that drain had been run into the ditch emptying, a dozen yards away, into the river. Nobody cared.

As the summer went on the cars increased, and also the soldiers in the camp; and at night there was a louder shouting under the 40-watt bulb in the fish-and-chip hut immediately below my bedroom window, lasting until midnight and after. Twice a week, as I lay in bed, I heard the slow clop-clop-clop of an old horse's feet on the asphalt street; the jingle of harness as the feet stopped; the clank of iron, followed by the dragging footsteps of a man whose duty it was, for twenty-five shillings a week, to empty the hundred and fifty pails in use by the cottagers. The Night Cart, as it was called, was a comparatively modern improvement in the village, gotten by the efforts of the late rector, who had died the year before. The Night Cart

superseded the Vault, which was a deep bricked hole under the outhouse which most cottages possessed.

The late rector, finding his parish duties incompatible with his nature, had developed the habit of spending most of his life in that part of London round about Leicester Square called the Jungle. From the Jungle he had returned for occasional services of marriage, burial, christening, and Sunday preaching. Usually he had arrived late, and was to be seen running out of the Rectory with a bit of bread and butter in one hand, stuffing it into his mouth, while trying to adjust his surplice with the other. It was a poor train service from London, and wedding parties frequently had to wait half a day or more for his precipitant arrival.

After he had been unfrocked, with considerable publicity, the ex-rector had joined a circus, where he had died on duty, as it were, while being exhibited in a lion's den, the lion objecting to his presence almost even more violently than some of his former parishioners. He had been buried in the churchyard soon after Sam and I had encamped for roadmaking, and about a couple of hundred people were there, most of them in summer clothes, idly to see the sight of the notorious rector being buried. Many of the villagers were there, too, in their best clothes, to say good-bye to Little Jim, as they called him. It was a dull sight, without incident; but one of the London papers described how 'thousands had fought round the grave' for souvenirs. It was a typical townie journalistic lie, and was written in the Turnip Arms before the funeral took place. I watched the reporter writing it while eating my lunch of bread and cheese at noon that day.

The Night Cart lived on after Little Jim, clanking lugubriously down Church Street every Tuesday and Friday night. The horse looked tired in the light of a smoky lantern; the man who led it never replied to my good nights, when I happened to be hurrying past him. Why indeed should he have made such an unrealistic reply? After making a tour of the village, the fellow took his vehicle up the hill to a field opposite Fourteen Acres, where it was emptied alongside the skulls and bones of bullocks, and other relicts of local butchery, with heaps of ashes, tins, broken glass, and unwanted rubbish. The dump, one of many

thousands rusting and glittering and stinking throughout the countryside of England, was the breeding ground of rats and flies; and a future Britain, I said to myself, would go there and pick all the broken glass and china-ware off the land of its heritage, and bury them in deep holes saying that such things were done in the Age of Industrial Dereliction.

Chapter Thirty-eight

HARVEST



On the 10th August 1938 we started to cut our first corn, the seven acres of oats on the southern end of Twenty-one Acres. At 7.5 a.m. the tractor began to drive down the four sides of a pale golden, wind-rustling square. Behind the tractor was an old Albion reaper-and-binder, bought at the auction last Michaelmas for £8. Long since had the paint rusted from the iron of its frame. Its worn three-horse draw-pole was now a chicken-perch in the cart-shed. The tractor on rubber wheels pulled the machine on a new oak-and-iron bar.

The binder was used to horses pulling it round the cornfields, often stopping to rest in the heat and light of summer: not this small, grey, metal donkey, smooth-running and near-silent and effortless in its power. Nursed along by the tractor, with throttle barely open, the old binder was not allowed to 'het-up', fumble its iron fingers tying the knot around each sheaf, or tangle and break the string. Its new red wooden sails turned gently, as though caressing the blonde corn-heads as they held the sappy stalks upright for the saw-toothed knife below. New canvas rollers hurried the cut corn up to a platform, where metal arms held the stalks until they were gathered sheaf-size; when, tied by those iron fingers, the sheaf was flung off in line with others dropped on the new stubble.

The oat sheaves on the southern seven acres of Twenty-one Acres were a golden brown. They felt slightly greasy as I picked them up to set them in shocks. The barley sheaves were lighter, more brittle, and the straw was pale to whiteness.

After two days our two best fields, Fourteen Acres and

Twenty-one Acres, were cut, and the sheaves set in lines of shocks.

The oats were cut before they were ripe, to mature while standing in the stook. The barley was cut as late as I dared, for the grain to wrinkle and ripen to the desired 'malting sample'. In 1937 good barley was making 30s. a coombe or sack; and on Twenty-one Acres, said Bob, we had fourteen coombe an acre, or at the previous year's price, £294 for the field. On the adjoining field of Fourteen Acres it was thought we had 10 coombe an acre, or at 30s. a sack, £210 for the entire field. £500 for the two fields, not counting the oats, would be fine, especially after the fiasco of the bullocks. After five months of fattening, eating half the valuation roots and a sixth of the hay, I had got £170 1s. 9d. for them. They had cost £170 to buy. I reckoned their food and labour had cost £80. I had one unsold, a gaunt old beast with a bad liver, who was now with the heifers on the meadows. I learned that beasts from Southern Ireland had a reputation for bad livers, due to disease from the impoverished soil, deficient in 'minerals'.

The corn of my first harvest was grown in the greatest drought of a hundred years. Rabbits from the woods and hedge-rows began to pare the plants level with the earth. I watched this helplessly. Jimmy suggested that I wait at evening with a gun, after the day's work; but after the day's work the night's work began.

'You don't seem to get any fun out of this farm, guv'nor. Mr. Strawless used to get hundreds of ducks flying to the decoy of an evening. Why don't you enjoy yerself, sometimes? Ye'r all wire, most of the time. Ye'r'll kill yerself, guv'nor. Go you and rest, and shoot them rabbits, why not?'

But the mounting bills had to be paid, and there was only one way I knew—work. So the rabbits ate to their spotted livers' content.

Rain fell in June, and in July the sea-green barley rippled in the winds like waves of a silken ocean. Silken changed to worsted; the sea-green blenched towards July's end.

By August the 3rd the hail or beard of the barley was a Viking yellow, and the wind siss-siss'd as it shook the drying corn-heads on the stalks.

On August the 9th those heads were down-hanging on the palest shrunken straw-stems. They looked to me like bleached prawns. The barley was 'fit'. I rubbed out a couple of ears in my palms. The kernels were yellow, wrinkled, sun-shrunken. All the field looked evenly ripe. Bob and I decided to cut; and the next day Bill and Jimmy went in with their scythes to cut a path round the field for the tractor to draw the binder.

The three-horse binder 'jattered' at first like an old hen. So we went slower, and the sheaves were thrown off more evenly. Sometimes the string broke, at other times it forgot to fling off sheaves and choked itself with them, and needed help to disgorge them. Mole hills clogged its shark-teeth knives; bolts and nuts shook off and had to be replaced.

The next afternoon boys and men waited with sticks round the triangle of uncut corn; and some of the corn-fed rabbits were in pies by the next evening.

I looked forward to the harvest, as a time of purification. It was exhausting work, but it drew the poisons of immobility out of the system. It was sweaty work, lifting the sheaves on to the wagon, then from the wagon to the stack. We had no mechanical elevator. Throwing up sheaves on a pitch-fork, one every three seconds, or standing on the stack and passing them along, was like surf-bathing. When I did it first I was soon smothered in sheaves; but I learned to catch them on the prongs as they were tossed up and to sling them onwards to the next man.

It was pleasant to see the children in the harvest field. They led the horses to the stack, and frolicked around us during lunch and tea. We worked twelve hours during fine weather.

Anxiously we watched dark thunder clouds moving around us, now over the sea, now over the distant horizon. But we were lucky: no tempest fell upon us.

Some farms a few miles away lost much of their corn, beaten down by terrific hailstorms, which killed half-grown lambs, shattered plants of sugar-beet and mangold, and stripped hundreds of acres of standing barley.

Every afternoon, I noticed, between five and six o'clock in the summer a cold drift of air moved silently, invisibly, upon the coast of Norfolk. It came across the sea from the Arctic

Circle. Though the sun was shining, and the waves never so still, the iceberg-air stole down the coast, and suddenly I felt I must put on my shirt.

Sometimes in the August mornings a white mist hung over the marshes and the sloping fields; the corn could not be carried until it had dried off and the sun was shining in a white-blue sky. This sea-mist was a boon to the barley growers, for it settled on the ears of barley and softened the grain, taking out the 'steel' from the kernels.

I had learned to bite a grain, and if it was hard to sever with the front teeth, and looked to be the colour of candle grease when cut, then it was steely. To help full ripening the sheaves were left in the stook, anything from two or three days to a fortnight after being reaped. We hoped that during that time a light rain or rains would fall on them, and the sun drying off the moisture afterwards, the skins would become more yellow and shrunken, and the kernels mature to a creamy-whiteness. If all the barley were like this, and plump like a partridge's breast, then I might have a first-class malting sample. Other conditions influenced the growth and maturity of the barley; the land must not be over-rich (unlikely on the Castle Farm yet awhile!) or strong. Excess of nitrogen would bring the grey candle grease colour to the kernel.

For eight days the patchy barley standing in Fox Covert had been swathed in grey mist; and towards noon this had grown thin and disappeared, and the sun had thrown down his warmth. The heads were hanging bleached and bent. We cut it then. By the evening the last sheaves were standing in rows, and I felt relief. When it was stacked, the men could have, in relays, their three-day holiday. My Devon firkin, or wooden bottle, had been emptied twice by the men during the making of the big stack on Twenty-one Acres.

Chapter Thirty-nine

BY THE CORN BARN



As I came down from Fox Covert, my bare arms red with barley-beard scratches, I saw the family sitting down to tea on the triangle of grass before the big barn.

When I came here first, the grass everywhere was foul with thistles, nettles, burdocks, and other weeds. Bit by bit the weeds have been removed, and in their place the wild-white clover is beginning to spread itself. The grassy triangle before the barn was now almost free of weed, and pleasant to sit upon.

Around the plot of grass lay the new roads, gleaming chalky-yellow in the sun. Near by was the chalk quarry, shaded by tall trees. I had worked hard in the harvest field, and could observe with the eyes of a clear conscience, the jackdaws flying to their nests in the quarry, and in the holes and hedges behind the festoons of ivy and other hanging plants. But soon I found myself thinking, not in terms of wild-bird nesting, but of the best way to bring down about a thousand tons of that chalk, to spread it over the arable and the grass, to sweeten the soil, counter any acid which crippled the growth of such plants as clover and sugar-beet.

A large cup of tea was a welcome sight. I lay at ease beside the children, and began to munch a piece of cake. It was a plum cake, made of brown wholemeal flour ground in one of the last windmills of East Anglia—which meant one of the last in England: for what the rest of England had abandoned, East Anglia, and particularly Norfolk, was still using. I had liked Norfolk because it was part of Old England, and often told myself that I must not grumble because old ideas were the spiritual counterpart of Old England. Thus the four fat pink

pigs, snouting in the clover a few feet away from our little family party, had been part of Old England, until, after much argument, they had been given freedom to roam wheresoever they wished.

The four pigs were the survivors of a litter of one of our pedigree Large White sows. Old Billy had been the pigman then, and the sow had farrowed during his absence. Most of her piglets had been found dead in the frosty morning; they had crawled in the straw after birth, and not finding the warmth of their mother, had died. Billy did not like pigs; his talents lay more in road-making and work in the fields, so Jimmy was appointed in his place.

Jimmy was brown-eyed, Celtic, with sensitive hands—although a stranger might not suspect it, seeing his fingers scarred and knobbed by nearly half a century of toil. Jimmy understood animals, he spoke softly to them, except when they were misbehaving, when Jimmy rated them briefly. Thus one of the sows, found with her front trotters in the bullocks' bin, would scramble out at a look from Jimmy, standing still twenty yards away, and uttering a growling, 'G-r-r! You!' And to me, 'She know she's no right to be thar,' Jimmy would say. 'She know right from wrong.'

Thirty-three piglets were born to the three sows, but only eighteen survived. Of these, twelve had gone to market at weaning time, to be sold for a guinea each; and the remaining six, too wretched-looking for market, were left behind. They were of an unhealthy whitish hue, and had been scouring in their 'box' in the cow-house. It was the box in which the bullock had died. I had insisted that the straw on which the beast had lain be burned; and also that the lower walls and floor be washed out with disinfectant.

The piglets did not thrive. There was something wrong with them.

'Look, they are in a dark place. That is bad. While the summer sun is shining outside, pouring down the divine rays of life, charging the grasses and the clovers with strength, these poor brutes are imprisoned. They need clover, sun, minerals. They should be turned out. No, pigs do not like such conditions. Pigs are not dirty by nature, but clean animals, always miserable

in their own muck. Don't you remember telling me how little new-born pigs went away from their beds to do their jobs? Pigs, Jimmy, like human beings, thrive best in freedom. Why not put them on grass? By being on grass for a few weeks or even months, before going into the fattening house, they can build up a healthy foundation. Let's turn them out! Look, we've seventy acres of meadows, full of weeds. Why not let the pigs eat the weeds, root up the rush-clumps, and manure the land?"

'You'll see, guv'nor, they'll fall in the grupps, and drown, and then you'll fault me.'

'Nonsense, pigs are swimming and wallowing animals by nature.'

'Ah, but they will run away, and get on the roads, or be found at Durston.'

Durston was a neighbouring hamlet, serving the big farm once farmed by Strawless, but now being reclaimed by a syndicate of land speculators, turned by the Town Planning Act into enthusiastic amateur farmers.

'If you order me to turn out the pigs, I'll do it, but they'll come to harm, for sartin.'

'But if they remain where they are, they will die!'

'Yes, they might die,' said Jimmy, slowly, looking at them. 'They won't eat their food.'

'Because their food is wrong, Jimmy! They lack something, Jimmy! They need copper sulphate perhaps, or some other mineral. They'll die in this box, Jimmy.'

'Well, you can't help a poor beast dying now and again.' Then in desperation, 'Look you here, I'm out sometimes at seven and eight at night, sarvin' your interests, master.'

'I know you are, dear Jimmy, I know your life and soul are in your work, I couldn't wish for anyone more honest or faithful to the farm; but, Jimmy, I think these pigs should be set free. However, if you don't really advise it, I will say no more. I'm only an amateur book-farmer.'

Another pig died. I reproached myself for my lack of will-power. I had made myself miserable, frustrated. I *knew* what they needed. At last, on a Sunday morning, I could bear it no longer; and with a violent shout ('We reckon it was the war that

done suthin' to our boss') I pulled open the door and let the little pigs, timorous and blinking, find their way to freedom.

'Let them be fed now, by the gate leading into the Home Meadow, and rattle the pail with a stick first; then they will return there at their feeding times. If they come to any harm, I alone am responsible.' I left Bob and Jimmy staring at the pigs looking about them on the concrete slab.

The little pigs began to root in the grass, turning up the old, tired turf with their snouts, seeking, seeking, seeking. The pallor left their bodies, they grew quickly, their skins took on a healthy pink. After a while they ceased to root and push up the turf, and ate grass instead. It reminded me of Baby Margaret, in the Devon garden—which had, with most of the fields of that county, a deficiency of lime—putting earth into her mouth. She had rotten teeth, and her nurse used to run after her, as she crawled on the flower beds, with 'Ah, you dirty girl!' Despite all such rating Baby Margaret, dark eyes hidden behind dark hair, used to watch the chance to crawl back; and one day she found an egg-shell, and with what avidity was it crunched up! Calcium! Rotten teeth! The 'Ah, dirty girl' nurse was religious and thought me perverse, wrong-headed; but for me God that day was in an egg-shell. Henceforward Margaret was given bone-building foods.

I lay at ease on the grassy triangle before the corn barn, drinking a mug of tea, beside my children. The small pink pigs, lively and skittish, grazed near us. Two half-grown kittens sat near the pigs. About a dozen hens were scratching near, ever watchful of the food in our hands. A turkey gobbler was supervising the hens. About two yards away, watching the gobbler, was a long-legged cart-horse foal.

Seeing my gaze upon him, the turkey gobbler went red in his cheek pendules. He leaned his neck forward, uttering a bubble-jockery cry, as of warning or protest at my presence. Life on a farm is rivalry. The stag-bird thrust down his wings, spread his tail, took three pompous steps in my direction, and spat at me. At least he seemed to spit. It was his way of asserting his male superiority over the group before the barn.

The foal seemed to enjoy the sight of the turkey strutting. It skipped around, and let out a playful sideway kick in the

turkey's direction. The turkey bubble-jocked, and the foal trotted to its mother tail-swishing in the tree-shade. As it passed me, it kicked out with two hind legs, as much as to say, 'Who do you think you are, anyway?' Well, I was the person who insisted that its navel cord, immediately after birth, should be disinfected, tied up with string, and then cauterized. This was not the local custom, of course; but when a neighbouring farmer lost two foals by the disease called 'big navel' it was thought, cautiously, that there might be something in the idea.

Last year, while I was camping in the woods above, a foal kicked—or 'slapped into', as they say in Norfolk—Ann's wooden table; and the pieces of that table still lie somewhere in the grass.

I wish someone could have filmed the scene. It would have revealed, without sentiment, the main object of life, which is to continue living. And living means, basically, the struggle for food.

The film would have shown that dumpy little boy over there, Baby Richard, eating a sandwich, until it is abruptly stolen by a hen from his small fat fist. He lets out a growl, his eyes harden, he rises for revenge. Meanwhile a dozen other hens are chasing the thief. The kittens run with them. The little pigs, disturbed in their clover-cropping, grunt and stand still. Before the smell of the travelling sandwich reaches their nostrils three hens in succession have seized and again lost the main fragment.

The chase continues under the trees where two swings hang. Meanwhile Baby Richard, uttering a mixture of Devon and Norfolk words, throws a dock stalk at the turkey. The turkey turns blue in the face. Richard walks towards him. The gobbler flushes red, leans forward, utters its cry, and spits. 'Gitoom!' cries Baby Richard, 'Damfool you be, old tarkey.' He returns to his mother for cake.

Hens are reptilian creatures. They are lower than the animals. The little pigs are sensitive about taking food from the children's hands. The cats, with dainty-stepping, eyelid-trembling, tail-curling approach, are diffident also. But hens are thrusters. They are thieves. See, it's happening again. Suddenly leaning over a hen snatches a piece of food from the hand of five-year-old

Robert. The little boy is about to take a bite from his banana-and-date sandwich, when it vanishes from before his open mouth.

'Gitoom!' he yells. That Devon expression still remains in his speech, though now he is almost an East Anglian shrill-voiced, word-clipping little boy. The hen certainly looks like getting home, as it races away on long legs. 'Gitoom!' pipes Richard. A general strafe begins. Pigs run off, grunting; kittens skip away; foal—daintily stepping around to see what's doing—kicks both hind legs into the air, and running back to black Gipsy, its mother, pretends to nuzzle for milk but instead whips round and prods her with a leg like a hurdle stake. Gipsy swishes her tail and regards the foal with calm approval.

A moment later children, pigs, hens, and kittens are back again, around the basket for food. Robert is consoled with cake. A hen peers within six inches of his hand, and gets cuffed before she can jerk forward an open beak. Robert looks at Richard with triumph and waves his cake in the air. 'Ha ha, old hen, you didn't get it that time!'

While I am amusedly watching this scene, a pink snout is rubbed against my coat. The snout belongs to Tig, the smallest of the pigs. Tig has come for his usual afternoon scratch. Tig is my favourite. He was the most wretched of the little lot in the dark box.

Tig's eyes close as he leans against my knuckles, rubbing his flank. With approval, I notice that since the pigs were turned out to roam about the grass their ticks are fewer. In fact, their ticks have gone. That old tractor-engine oil squirted over their backs, and making them look like zebras, has had its effect. One day we'll have proper pig-houses on the farm. I don't like those dark, damp caves which have probably housed pigs since the making of the Domesday Book—that last attempt to civilize Britain. I want to see pigs folded over some of the starved fields, and, later, those fields growing fine crops of corn again.

On the grassy hillside a covey of partridges creeps. The little turtle doves are cooing about the hawthorns. The children are now on the swings. Mother goes to feed the turkeys in the big wire cage below Hilly Piece. I take the Ferguson tractor up to Hilly Piece, and with cultivator attached to the three arms

behind, worked by the automatic oil-pump, I draw the duck-footed cutting edges through the friable, loamy, well-worked soil. All the summer I have been cutting the thistles, preparing a seed-bed for wheat. While I am working the soil, Jimmy passes by and says (can I be hearing aright?)—‘If you’re lived and spared, you’ll see a wheat crop on this field next summer.’ This is high praise from the cautious old fellow. ‘That’s a fine implement behind your tractor, guv’nor.’ Jimmy, Jimmy, let me shake you by the hand.

Chapter Forty

THE WINDHOVERS



It was nearly the end of my first year as a farmer. My stacks were thatched, awaiting the threshing machine. The harvest moon had waned, and soon the new moon would arise in the east, to grow into the hunter's moon. The first geese would be fighting across the sea and the sky, uttering their familiar cronkle-honkle high in the air.

How far away the old life seemed, when I used to wander about the sands and cliffs of Devon, free to watch birds and look at wild flowers, and to meditate on the scenes of books to be written. It would be strange, having nothing to do but write and watch and eat and walk and sleep. A farmer sees little of the seasons, he is too busy. As old Jimmy said when we were topping-up the last stack on Hang High, and we turned a moment to the north and looked down below at the woods and meadows, the marshes, the distant line of sea, yellow sands, and pale expanse of sky. 'Yes, it's a good view, master, if you've time to see it.' Perhaps when the thistles and docks are gone, and the corn grows again as it did once in Merrie England—sixteen sacks an acre instead of six or seven—and my little boy is a young man, I shall be able to see the spring and summer once more. On the granary floor the small sail-boat *Pinta* is lying, slowly filling with dust and mortar flakes from the tiled roof above. It lay idle on its mooring for four seasons in Devon; next year, perhaps the year after, it will have a new coat of paint, and the waves will slap against its bows.

My work over, I strolled down between the plantations to the field called Spong Breck, poor grass, starved, full of moss and ragwort. Below were the meadows, patchy with clumps of

rushes and thistles. My plan to rejuvenate Spong Breck was to bring a thousand tons of rich black mud dug out of the drains and hauled from the grupps, to be spread on the fifteen acres, at the rate of forty or fifty tons to the acre. It would take five years. Before the tumbrils could cross from John's Pasture to Mary's Meadow, and thence to Lark's Bush Meadow, the culverts over the grupps must be remade, in concrete; the present ones, of rotten wood and chalk, were fallen in ruins.

It would be pleasant to be a bird-watcher for a year: to wander thoughtless through the calm sequent days of summer's ending: mist at morning: pallid disc of sun: windless heat and light of pale blue heaven and yellow line of sand dimming to the small red smoulder of sunset: the strings of tired birds, arriving over the sea, and settling at once on the marshes and in the low sand-dunes.

Day after day of windless calm and of sunlight, serene and warm, as though all life were suspended on the earth, save for the movement of wave and tide, the piping and passing of birds.

The early autumnal days were the more beautiful for that soon the sea would be hard and black, with white lines on shoal and sandbank, while the tractor driver on the hills fastened the sack closer round his waist, against the bitter wind. Soon through the mists would float the woodcock moon, pale and circular; and with the north-east wind would come those strange birds, with dead-leaf mottle plumage and long beaks and gentle brown eyes, flapping across the North Sea, from the forests of Norway, and the stone walls of cold fields above fiords in whose green, glissading depths great salmon moved to the spawning beds.

Soon the wind would arise, and the woodcock flights over the sea begin. Singly and in twos and threes, while the moon moved up the sky wind-burnished and bright, with a purple shine about its winter-beginning, the woodcock would come darkly over the waves. The wildfowlers on the marshes would be waiting for them.

The survivors, after resting in the marram grasses at the sea's edge, would fly inland, to woods and hedgerows, and at cock-shut light would ride the glades between leaf-scanty trees,

strangely owl-like, but gentle and without the hunting purpose of owls, flapping in silence, eerily, as though an animation of forest life that is sleeping at the fall of the year: the hovering spirit of leaves soon to be formless, gone into the ultimate dark of life.

Coming down through the hillside trees, I see the brown tiled roofs of the farm buildings below, and hear above them a shrill, near-petulant cry: *Kee-kee-kee-kee*. Another answers near me. I stand still, beside a storm-snapped poplar stump.

A thin brown bird is flying in a circle towards the stump, answering the cries from the roofs below. Its wings are tile-brown; it is about the size of a pigeon, but more slender, more delicate.

When about ten yards from me, and level with my eyes, the brown bird swings into the gentle valley wind—the very gentle air-flow of late summer—and stays there, as though hanging from an invisible thread. It leans on the wind, balancing itself on the warm air coming up from the stony cart-track sixty feet under it. Feathers of those outspread wings feel sensitively, like fingers, for the staying wind. Tail-feathers, too, are always moving, adjusting themselves. A piece of paper would fall, slantwise, to the ground: the bird stays there, quiveringly.

It is a kestrel, sometimes called windhover or mouse-hawk. Actually it is not a hawk, but a falcon, having the tooth in the beak, and the full-brown eyes, of the true falcons. Hawks have yellow-ringed eyes. Hawk or falcon, such birds are not common in Norfolk. It is probable that, until this year, no pair of kestrels has nested on the farm during the past century. Few hawks are allowed to nest in Norfolk, home of the wild pheasants.

This spring a hen kestrel laid four rusty brown eggs in the slight hollow atop the broken poplar stump. The parent birds are now gone, the young left to themselves. They feel lost, they cry one to another, their wistful cries echo among the trees. Two perch on the ridge of the chaff barn; a third flutters on the sloping tiles of the cart-shed. Look! The hovering bird is flying towards them, see how they flutter their wings, uttering their shrill chattering cries. *Kee-kee-kee-kee!*

A sudden happiness fills me that the kestrels are here. 'You ought to get rid on those hawks, or they'll take all your young birds,' says Bob. Then 'Our best beet plants are being cut about by those old blackbeetles, blast, I don't know how to stop them.' Strange that he does not know how kestrels eat blackbeetles.

Once I had two tame kestrels. I remember how the nest, from which I took them, was littered with feathers of small birds, rat and mice bones, and a great number of bluish-black beetles which had been thrown up from the crops of the fledglings. I used to watch the father bird hovering over the fields, searching for movement of beetle or mouse. I felt myself to be behind its piercing eyes, felt myself shocked by a sudden movement below. The gaze of those eyes would harden: the bird drop gently, *slide* down the uprising wind current, while into those liquid eyes, with their stereoscopic sight, the movement-outline would cut with the intensity of the spirit of life; its heart quicken, wings foreshorten, and the bird fall, yellow feet and black talons spread for the clutch. And what a clutch! Once on the back of my left hand were eight blue points of pierced flesh, where talons had drawn together on alighting.

Those wistful cries in ancient sunlight! I can hear them now, as the tawny birds fly down from the elm-tree, in the harvest light of the everlasting golden sun of boyhood. Yet the sunlight was changed, somehow; it was far away, and still; for I was wearing a new khaki uniform, and had come to say good-bye. The train would leave in an hour: and the wings of my tame kestrels were flickering flame-colour against the deep blue as they hovered above my head, dropping to perch on my shoulder and forearm and cry shrilly to my eyes, as though in petulant inquiry of something not seen there before. Wing-shivering, filaments of nestling-down waving on new feathers, beaks half-open and pouring out a kind of subdued complaint, eyes anxiously, almost reproachfully, fixed on mine. They followed me over the hill to the station, and I never saw them again . . . and here's another boy, nearly the age I was then, running down through the wood, stopping suddenly to creep towards me, silently by the broken poplar.

'Coo, they're lovely, aren't they?' Then, 'You won't shoot

them, will you, Dad? Bob says you ought to.' Pause. 'They eat lots of mice and beetles, you know.'

Kee-kee-kee-kee!

'Last term, a chap and I had one as a pet.'

'I thought it was against the rules, you told me.'

'Yes, it was, but you see, a master fed it for us.'

'Oh.'

'It's wild now, we never caged it.' Again, anxiously, 'You won't shoot them, will you? Why don't you answer?'

Ride the autumn wind, little falcons: we shall not harm you.

Chapter Forty-one

RATS



My barley stacks on the Hang High and Twenty-one Acres were whispering and heaving with rats. That was the impression I got when I stood still by the walls of straw, and looked, and listened. The sides of the stacks were like a broken jig-saw puzzle, where the rats climbed to their holes.

I heard squeaks, rustles, grating sounds as they nibbled the ears of corn within. I became aware of little furtive movements close to my face. There was a rat just behind that bit of straw. He'll come out in a second: hold the stick ready.

But he did not come out. I realized that other bits of straw were shifting slightly. Heavens, the whole stack was in movement. Or was it that I was giddy? No, the illusion of motion was given by slight movements of straw all over the jig-saw puzzle. Almost the stack was seething. Hundreds, thousands of rats inside! It was one great tenement of rats.

When I took over the farm a little over a year ago I found that every flint-and-brick wall of about one and a half acres of buildings was tunnelled, re-tunnelled and counter-tunnelled with rats. Hundreds of tons of concrete were needed to re-foot the walls. Some of those walls, two feet thick, were leaning because rats had literally scooped away the foundations. From one wall of one small barn they had thrown up two tumbril-loads of earth, chalk, and straw from the stables adjoining. We cleared this away; and in six months another load, more than a cubic yard, had been thrown up. This from about one-hundredth of the wall-area of the farm buildings.

A thin man in a worn blue suit, buttoned to the neck, called on me one morning and said he was a vermin-killer. He said he

would poison all the rats on the farm for £3 a year. He was well-known in the district, he said, and hearing I was a stranger, he wanted to help me. And could he have half the money in advance?

I gave him half. With a little soiled cloth bag containing dry poisoned oatmeal, and small wooden spoon, he visited one or two holes in the hedge-bottoms, and shook a little oatmeal down them. After wandering about the fields, he disappeared saying he would return in a few weeks. The rats remained as before.

Meanwhile I found out about him. He had gone to most people who were new to the district, got money from them to clear the rats, put in an occasional appearance, and then no more. He did no harm to rats.

I wrote to him about the rats in the stacks, and in the farm premises.

My Dear Sir,

I was at your Farm recently and poisoned the rats round all your Fields and premises, there is hardly any traces of rats round the fields, and there is not six pennyworth of damage done to your stacks, which is a sure sign there are very few rats, otherwise the corn would have been found lying round the bottom of the stack. A hole here and there means nothing, or birds.

I am Sir

Yours obediently

FRED FLATT

vermin Killer

When he came again, he demanding the remainder of his money, I took him to the stack. He expressed amazement.

'Why, sir, you have been the victim of a mass migration of rats! You as a nature writer will have heard of this phenomenon. They have come from the next farm, I shouldn't wonder, or the village garbage dump. By the way, strychnine is now forbidden by law, and my partner and I grind our special deadly poison, and it is very expensive. But it's effective, that's why we need only to use a small amount. Deadly, it is. If you can let me have the rest of the money, I'll clear this stack in two doses.'

Needless to add, Mr. Flatt did not get the remainder of the money, despite a rapid change of moods from flattery to threats, and then to his final shot, 'I think you are no gentleman.'

'And I think you are the King of the Rats.'

His reply was unprintable.

Until I could get someone to clear the rats and rabbits off the farm, I got the Ratin Company to control the rats. For £15 they contracted to keep the premises clear for one year.

The next day two men arrived in a saloon car. The back of it looked like a baker's van, piled with loaves. They took the loaves from the car, with a couple of bread-knives, and for an hour or more they cut the bread into doll's-house slices, wrapping each slice neatly in newspaper. It looked like preparations for a School Treat; the guests were not children, but the four-footed friends of Fred Flatt. For the next two hours the men went around the premises, leaving the packages at the entrances of the holes.

The rats found them, and being familiar with bits of paper enclosing scraps of bread—I was trying hard to teach the men to be tidy with their litter on another's property—another queer habit of the eccentric new farmer—the rats opened them and ate the tasty food within. Nothing happened; no rats began to squeal with pain, thus scaring the rest. The food was O.K.

After a fortnight the men returned. The rats had another feast, and being rats, had not cleared up their litter. It was like a miniature Hampstead Heath after a Bank Holiday.

They were given another treat. This time the sandwiches were much more tasty. There was dripping between the slices of bread. In the dripping was a bacillus or germ which affected only rats and mice. We found rats curled up in the stacks when we threshed the corn, where they had died in their sleep. We saw no more rats in the barn, stables, or the hovel. They had died of the plague.

Of course there was criticism of this £15 being spent on clearing rats. £15 was a lot of money, etc., etc. Why, other farmers never bothered about the rats, and they did quite well out of the farm. Confronted again and again with this sort of slowly uttered, serious criticism, I found that my patience was

gone, and an abrupt manner, mingling of scorn and anger against obstructive and negative attitudes of mind, was becoming almost a second nature.

There was no creative feeling behind the obstructive mentality. When I heard that the village schoolmaster, now dead, used to cane the boys on their hands and continue to strike them until he broke down their resistance with cries and tears, and that one of the boys had set his teeth and refused to cry out, the cause of the countering of so much that was said and ordered by me was immediately plain. I was acting with authority; and the immature nervous system of a fundamentally good boy had set itself to resist authority. What was the cause of the caning, I inquired. Mischievousness, disobedience? No: not paying attention to dull, unreal lessons: the natural inability of the young mind to take in unrealizable kings, dates, ports, exports, imports, rivers, bays, mountains, and other alien 'life'. Truly there was more to clear up on the farm than weeds, vermin, and material decay.

The corn stacks were the breeding tenements of the rats, which, before the harvest, lived in their colonies under the walls of buildings, in holes of the banks and hedges, or which disported themselves, with buzzing flies, on the Parish Council dump, where the contents of the Parish Night Cart was dumped bi-weekly. Here among skulls, bones, and offal, well-damped with blood from the village slaughter-house, was the Rats' Lido, where in summer they played before the serious work of getting fat and raising families in the barley stacks of the autumn and winter.

Rats, weeds, swamps, depressed markets, labourers on the dole, rotten cottages, polluted streams, political parties and class divisions controlled by the money-power, wealthy banking and insurance houses getting rid of their land-mortgages and investing their millions abroad (but not in the Empire), this was the real England of the period of this story of a Norfolk farm.

When I began farming it was nearly the end of that period.

Chapter Forty-two

I MAKE MY BALANCE SHEET



One winter night, drawing up my chair to the three-legged table, and switching on the radio, I set about making my profit and loss account for the first year's farming. I had methodically kept details of all that had been bought and sold, and now I was about to learn the worst. I had an overdraft of four hundred pounds at the bank, and had sold most of the stocks and shares left to me at my mother's death, as well as some War Loan saved from my book earnings; and all of Loetitia's money. I hardly dared to look at my pass book nowadays, with its weight of details of hundreds of cheques paid out.

There was one consolation: the farm belonged to us, and so we didn't have to pay any rent; but in making up a profit and loss account, the value of the rent must be charged. It was £115 a year. Also I had to charge what is called depreciation of dead stock. On a farm there is live stock, and there is dead stock. Before I started farming, I had idly noticed advertisements of farm sales, with, 'useful live and dead stock'. In my ignorance, I wondered what sort of bids at an auction would be made for a dead cow, or an expired pig; but very soon learned that it was a term of convenience, live stock meaning beasts and birds; dead stock meaning carts, harrows, ploughs and other machinery.

My tractor and its extra rubber wheels and implements had cost £360, and it was obvious that at the end of the year it was not still worth that sum. Part of it was worn away. It was second-hand. Obviously its value could only be judged by its market value, its second-hand price. The difference between first cost price and second-hand price was the amount of its depreciation.

But to save the poor farmer his perplexity, the benevolent Income-Tax authorities had decided that the depreciation of a tractor and implements in one year was a little less than a quarter of its first cost. So £81 worth of my tractor, and its ploughs and cultivator, had been worn away. It was a dead loss.

Likewise the tumbrils, ploughs, hurdles, the seed drill, cultivator, harrows, reaping machine, had lost some of their value; though they had not worn so quickly as the tractor, which did the giant's job on a farm. The other implements had depreciated one-eighth of their cost value since Michaelmas 1937.

In making the balance sheet of the Castle Farm, on the Expenses or Loss side went the rent and the depreciation, with the cost of seeds, fertilizers, the loads of straw bought to litter horses and pigs, fuel and oil for tractor, feeding stuffs for pigs and nut-cake for bullocks, visits of veterinary surgeon and the bills of the blacksmith, costs of threshing, including steam coal—these and other items went on one side of the page, with the wages total; and all I had sold, or still had to sell, such as calves growing into bullocks, little pigs still with sows or being fattened into porkers and baconers, and the value of my hay, straw, corn, growing crops, and residue of fertilizers left in the ground, went on the other side.

Loetitia brought me in a cup of tea. The babies were in bed, and she was relaxing for a few minutes. She worked hard all day, a 16-hour day. 'Look,' I said, 'the awful moment when I shall know what a flop I am is upon us.' When I spoke like that, very occasionally, Loetitia seemed to be happier; I knew it was a strain to be working or living with me. (How often I wished I could get back to the early years when I used to talk in that old-fashioned magazine-story idiom.)

'Yes, dear, it will be exciting,' said Loetitia. 'Can I help you?'

Always willing to help, Loetitia set to work to check my figures. Meanwhile I was at the Profit and Loss account, prepared to learn that I was perhaps four or five hundred pounds out of pocket. But when I added both columns up, and subtracted the smaller from the bigger, I was appalled.

Loetitia made her muttering calculations. Yes, it was so. We stared at each other. Of course, I said, the farm hadn't yet really

got going; the first year was always a pretty awful one for a newcomer. Even so, how can all this money be lost? Nearly eight hundred pounds!

The chief loss was in the barley. Half the arable of the farm had been sown down to barley and oats, about sixty-five acres. Despite the drought, and the poor seed-beds of about half this area, the yield had not been bad. Only one field, ten acres of Fox Covert, had yielded poorly. The seed was drilled too late, on the last day of April; and owing to the dry cobbles underneath, ploughed in hurriedly, the plants were irregular. Some of the ears ripened weeks before others. The barley from it was no good for malting; only for grinding into pig-meal.

Twenty-one Acres, the aftermath of the hay ploughed in, had a grand yield: fourteen and a half sacks to the acre, which was nearly as much as that field had grown in its known history. Altogether we had 471 sacks or coombes from our entire crop, just over 47 tons. This I had hoped would bring in about £600, at the price barley was making the previous year. Fertilizers and seed alone had cost £150, one quarter of this sum; but I had reckoned that the £600 would go some way towards getting half of the general loss of the first year back.

Then, before we had threshed out the stacks, the East Anglian barley market crashed. Thousands of farmers were in a similar plight to myself. Instead of twenty-five to thirty shillings a sack, they were offered twelve shillings for ordinary and eighteen shillings for the very best. Over 150,000 tons of barley from Poland, Czecho-Slovakia, Roumania, and Russia had been imported during the late summer, while we were harvesting our crops, and with this foreign corn the brewers and maltsters had 'filled up'. I threshed the stacks, and kept the corn in heaps in the barn, hoping for a rise. The prices got lower.

'Drink your tea before it gets cold, dear,' said Loetitia. 'Don't worry,' she added. Soon she left, for the top cottage, on the roof of which the copper fox groaned in the night winds. We had brought it from Shallowford, and very lonely it looked in this decaying village of the unwanted granary of England. Poor Loetitia, what sort of a mess had I got her and Sam and the children into?

Our capital had gone: but I had my pen. I would go to London twice a month, and suggest ideas to editors for articles, and also try for some more broadcasts. I would have to sell the barley for what it would fetch. No use mouldering in the barn, for the rats to mess over and spoil.

As I typed out the balance sheet, to be pinned up in the cartshed, for the men to see (I thought they ought to know what was happening) I found my spirits rising. Personally, I did not mind the drop in the barley prices. It wasn't my fault. It was not due to any stupidity or neglect on the farm; therefore it was not injurious to the spirit. I was buoyed up by the thought that the men working with me had worked well.

Being short of hay—no haysel this year, owing to my ignorance and neglect to ask Mr. Barkway to arrange it with Mr. Stubberfield—we had cut twenty acres of semi-swamp weeds during June, and made a stack of them, to be laid in the yards as litter and trodden down for muck, and thus to help provide the much-needed humus; but when we put it in the yards, we found the heifers ate it eagerly. That was ten tons of feeding stuff on hand, and the meadows improved by the weed cutting. There were no harmful weed-seeds in that fodder; for swamp-land weeds would not grow on upland arable. The chief weed was *persicarius*, with its pink flower: strange, the cattle ignored it when green, but enjoyed it as hay. The bull ate it more eagerly than the heifers.

The bull was a gentle Aberdeen-Angus animal, black and glossy, and without horns. Being young, he had never seen green grass before coming to our farm. He had been reared in a covered yard, near King's Lynn. We put him among our heifers, and promptly he ran away, round the meadow, prancing and plunging and hurling his tail about. He was fifteen months old. An old cow, hitherto master of the herd, ran after him, and he fled into the river; but gained confidence later and pushed her into the grupp. Then he gave a roar and plunged about again, the spongy bog-turf flying from his hoofs. He charged the stack of marsh-litter, standing near the gate, and rolled over on his back and kicked his legs like a happy dog. The six heifers and three cows stared at him, wondering what sort of a thing it was come amongst them. They soon found out;

and next summer I hoped to see nine blackish-brown Aberdeen-Angus calves also jumping round the paddock.

Making my valuation that morning, I wrote down that I had nine calves in the boxes, three of our own—one of the in-calf heifers turned out to be barren—and six bought at Norwich market and reared on the three cows. It gave me pleasure to look at the calves, 'growing into money', said Jimmy. They were helping to get the farm going, with the thirty-two pigs of the second farrowing of the three sows, and our little ewe flock. Windles and I bought twenty-five maiden-shearling ewes first-cross at the Wordingham September Sheep Fair, and a pedigree Hampshire Down lamb-ram with them. We put ruddle or red-earth on his belly, and so learned what wives he had taken to himself. He took twenty-five, all I could afford at the Sale, in a few days, and proudly stood among them, ready to butt any stranger approaching. One of the ewes, in lamb, died later; she rolled over on her back, and being fat, could not get on her feet again. Her head was downhill, and there she lay all night, and in the morning had choked herself. That was seventy shillings lost.

The rubber-tyred tumbrils rolled easily along our new roads. Going up to Fox Covert, or coming down, with a load of straw or corn, had always been an anxiety to the teamsmen of Castle Farm; almost it pulled the hearts out of the horses going up, and coming down with sacks of wheat or barley during threshing, in winter, was a perilous journey. To-day our new road was cut into the side of the hill, level and wide and firm, and for the next few centuries the problem of transport was solved.

I hoped to begin the draining of part of Saint John's Pasture in the interval between harvest and root-lifting. Sponge Breck abounded in dwarfed wild white clover. I looked forward to seeing how the rich black soil would encourage the growth of the clover next spring, after the chalk we had already spread over the field in July had countered the acid in the soil. Next spring the bull, with his wives and sons, moving up from Saint John's Pasture and Mary's Meadow, would add to the humus; and for five years the sheep and beasts would add to its fertility. In 1943, when it was dressed all over with black soil, it would be ploughed, and sown with corn. The chalk would sweeten the

soil, and the roots of clover store up nitrogen. The Government had begun to do something for farming: there was the Land Fertility Scheme, by which half the cost of digging and carrying (but not spreading) the chalk was refunded to the farmer. We had dug and carried about 170 tons on Spong Breck, and had received just over £10 for the job.

Chapter Forty-three

FACT AND FANCY



The balance sheet of the first year, as I reckoned it:

THE EXPENSES

	£	s.	d.
Depreciation of dead stock (12·5 per cent of £360) ..	45	0	0
Depreciation of tractor and implements (22·5 per cent of £360: a coincidence that these figures were the same)	81	0	0
Labour (4 full-time men, and casuals for threshing, etc.)	390	14	0
Rentable value of farm	115	0	0
Drainage rates and insurances, lorry tax, etc.	52	0	0
Petrol and oils for tractor, etc.	53	0	0
Feeding stuffs for horses, pigs, etc... .. .	105	3	4
Seeds	79	14	6
Fertilizers	120	16	6
Coal for threshing	3	14	0
Ingoing covenants (paid to previous bankrupt tenant for the muck in yards, hay, and roots, also legal award of a year's rent for 'disturbing his business')	385	0	0
Livestock (ten bullocks for fattening on the aforesaid roots and hay, and to tread barley straw to make muck in the yards)	170	0	0
Total ..	£1,601	2	4

THE RETURNS

	£	s.	d.
One dead bullock, died of tuberculosis	1	0	0
The other bullocks, when fat	170	1	6
By sales of barley	301	0	0

THE RETURNS

	£	s.	d.
By 840 rabbits dug out and trapped by Durston man, my share, one-third of sales	9	11	0
Value of hay and straw	140	0	0
For 20 agisted bullocks at 4s. per head per week	32	0	0
Value of wheat on Hilly Piece	60	0	0
By sales of pigs, or value at end of year if unsold	35	0	0
Calves, and increased value of horned stock	35	0	0
Manures	60	0	0
Value of Fox Covert barley kept for pig-feeding, 55 coombe	28	0	0
Value of oats, 140 coombe, kept for horses, etc.	56	0	0
Value of Foal	15	0	0
Total	£942	12	6

PROFIT AND LOSS BALANCE SHEET

	£	s.	d.
Total of expenses	1,601	2	4
Five per cent of all capital in the farming business (5 per cent of £2,231 4s. 0d.)	111	1	2
	£1,712	3	6
Less Returns	£942	12	6
Loss	£769	11	0

Turning away from this fearsome arithmetic, I began to amuse myself by speculation on what might have been. If the barley prices had not dropped by more than half, we should have had about £600 for the barley, which would have reduced the loss by £300. And if I had occupied the farm when Strawless went bust, I would have avoided the £100 for 'disturbance', leaving a loss of £369 11s. Furthermore, the rent wasn't an actual loss, or was it? So let's take that off, leaving £254 11s. Also, wasn't that 5 per cent of all capital somewhat formal? Shouldn't a member of the Imperial Socialist Party scorn the tenets of usury? Perhaps I ought not to have counted that £111 1s. 2d. as lost interest on capital? £254 11s. less £111 1s. 2d. left £143 9s. 10d. That wasn't so bad. And some of my dead

stock had been bought at pit-of-depression prices at auctions, so possibly the £45 did not truly represent a loss through rust, decay, wear, smash, and scrape. £143 9s. 10d. less £45 left a total of only £98 9s. 10d. And furthermore, the tractor implements—plough and cultivator—were listed under the 22½ per cent instead of 12½ per cent. Also the tractor had been fitted with a new engine, free, by the Ferguson people, since the original engine had been faulty—there are always one or two engines out of every hundred that go wrong, just as there are three or four star engines in the same batch; no engineer seems to know why. Supposing then I knocked off the £81 for the tractor just for fun. £98 9s. 10d. less £81 left £17 9s. 10d. That wasn't bad for the first year's farming, I told myself. Ah, I had forgotten the black bullock which didn't go to market, the last of the ten bought from the farming association I had joined. He was surely worth what I had paid for him, £17? So knock off £17 from £17 9s. 10d. and only 9s. 10d. was left. Not so bad! I rushed in to tell Loetitia—let's pretend that only nine shillings and tenpence was lost after all! We had a pot of tea to celebrate the good idea.

But it was make-believe; and in the morning the overdraft remained to tell the truth.

All those hours of walking behind the drill, pouring the golden grain into the bushel measure—and before that the hundreds of hours on the tractor, in the bitter cold wind from the Pole, or trudging behind Gilbert and Blossom drawing the old single-furrow plough; the anxiety about getting a seed-bed because there was a drought, and the land 'cloddy'; then the care with which we broadcast, by hand, the very best chemical fertilizer, after analysing the soil; to get everything right to make a fine start . . . then the children leading in the horses at harvest, with the towering sheaves on our fine new rubber-tyred tumbrils. Everyone working his hardest, sweat and sunburn; and the steward always glancing at the southern sky, for thunderstorms were about. Thousands of hours of work and thought and hope; and we were beaten by the System before we started, even as we had cried from the loudspeakers to the empty village squares.

In the market place people were beginning to talk. The Government, said the farmers, ought to do something about it. Wheat was already subsidized; beef was subsidized, but not enough to hearten farmers to fatten bullocks to tread straw to make muck to grow corn. It did not pay to produce sheep to eat the swedes in the fields and so add fertility to the corn-lands while growing into mutton. Now barley and oats must be subsidized, and mutton as well. I wrote articles in the *Daily Express*, and was surprised that they printed such a sentence as:

Hail Argentine beef, interest on the £600,000,000 invested over there by our PATRIOTIC LOVERS OF ENGLAND!

On the middle page, soon afterwards, advertisements declaring that CHILLED BEEF RULED THE ROAST appeared in the same newspaper. At least the *Daily Express* gave both sides of the conflict; but the B.B.C., more scrupulously sterilized, asked me, with invariable courtesy, to tone down all references to white (devitalized) bread, foreign food, and farming depression. The reason given was that the Empire and Home listeners should not be unduly depressed. They wanted to hear that everything was fine in the Old Country.

At night one of the loud speaker vans of our wilderness political party cried forth the following:

‘Moving along the sky-line of the southern boundary of my farm the other day were six old-fashioned wagons. They were loaded with barley straw. The straw was being moved to another farm, four miles away. The farmer was “gone in”, and his farm had been taken over, for the remainder of the year, by a neighbour.

‘The straw was part of the land’s heart. It should, by the rules of good farming, which were the same rules applying to human life, remain on the farm.

‘There was a land-owning “business man” I knew of, in Devon, who sold up in 1919 because he thought England was finished. He was a rich man apart from his land and his farms; and because he was a rich man, with an orthodox economic training, he got out as soon as he saw that things were not going to be so good. At least he put his capital in the Empire; he started farming on a large scale in Kenya.

'Nowadays it is Kenya where the going is not so good. The farmer who bought the Devon land has done better in Devon than the rancher has done in East Africa. Devon has become the playground of England, and the strong green grass, nourished by the lusty, southern sun and warm ocean rains, fattens bullocks of itself. People on holiday like to eat English beef if they can. If the old landlord had regarded the land as a way of life rather than a way to make money—that is, more than a modest living—he might have stuck out the depression and been the gainer.

'That was an exceptional case, however. It was not every farm in the nineteen-thirties that could get 14s. a week from each of hundreds of caravans resting during twelve weeks of the summer on one of his grass fields, or have new hotels adjoining, with demands for cream and butter at fancy prices.

'Since so many "prudent" business men have decided during the past half-century that England wasn't what it was—read Rider Haggard's book *A Farmer's Year*, published 1899—much money has been invested abroad, all of it in the determination that business returns must always be bigger and better wherever possible. An English farm labourer received 14s. a week in 1914; but a Central European peasant or a South American *gaucho* received about 14d. So for years the British farmer has gradually been losing heart, with his land; and when he goes the straw leaves the land; and the new tenant, if one can be found to take that impoverished soil, will have to put the equivalent back into the fields before he can take any decent crops from them.

'Once it is lost, it is lost for ever. The land must be fed, like any other living thing. It is not just dirt. It is a highly complex balance of bacteria feeding on what is generally called humus—old plant tissues—so that the new plant life can draw strength from it while putting forth other roots to draw up phosphates, salts of nitrogen and ammonia, and so to fulfil itself in the sunshine.

'Look what they have done in America! They ploughed in the prairie, under the grasses and flowers of which lay stored the humus—the vegetable graveyard—of centuries. They grew crop after crop of wheat, scores of crops, saying the soil was inexhaustible.

'The soil was nobody's real home, that was the trouble. There were no real human roots in it; only the temporary roots of finance. At last they got to the end of the reserves, and dust remained. Then Nature took a hand, and the winds blew, and what was left of the fields went overhead, so that in some places the chimneys of farmhouses were literally filled up. Tens of thousands of square miles desolate, abominable: strewn with the bones of animals, and the broken hopes of men.'

Chapter Forty-four

FARMHOUSE PARTY



The month of grace allowed the old gardener called 'Napoleon' to quit the cottage had long gone by, and he showed no signs of moving. He had been offered £25 to leave; 'not even the King will turn me out'. I had gone to his son, who lived and worked in Whelk, and asked him to do something about it. He had seen his father, but the old man would not move. He wanted to look after his wife. I was still sorry for him, but not so sorry when he had refused abruptly my offer to put him in one of the reconditioned cottages.

The son lived in a tiny, dark cottage among others similarly small and dark. There was no room for the old man, even if the wife were taken to a mental home.

The third year of my ownership of the cottage drew nigh, and still the old man lived there; and in desperation I was about to apply to the Court, when an old woman in the village had a stroke, and it seemed that her cottage might soon become vacant. Napoleon, for all his forlorn appearance, displayed a swiftness of action associated with his historical counterpart; his usual shuffle changing to a stiff striding, he went to see the landlord, and secured the next tenancy. The old woman died, and Napoleon prepared to quit.

When almost the last barrow-load had been pushed to his new house, and the last cabbage rooted up, I went round to look at my new house. I was standing by the well, thinking the place empty, when the kitchen door opened and the old woman bundled out. 'Be off, you!' she cried, in well-remembered tones. 'Devil, thief, fool!' As on the occasion two years previously, I retreated round the corner.

I was sorry for the poor woman: an eccentric who had let herself disintegrate. I had heard in the village that she had been queer since her only son had got married. She had been a lady's maid, and had a box full of fine clothes; and on one occasion she had hired a motor-car and driven to the house of Lord Norwich, ten miles away. The driver from Whelk had not recognized her in Edwardian garden-party hat with ostrich plume, feather boa, black silk dress and parasol. Haughtily telling him to ring the bell, she waited in the car until the butler came down the steps, to be informed that she was Lady Norwich. After some words, the driver, by now unhappy about his money, took her home again. He was paid what he demanded, and the old lady went inside and gradually became a recluse.

At last the place was empty. Loetitia and I opened the gate and went in. The latticed windows were pleasing, though they had not been painted for a score of years. We opened the front door, and immediately were in a gloom of mustiness, scaly walls, smoke-black ceiling hung with cobwebs.

There was, however, a fine beam across the ceiling. In this main room were two windows, one facing south and sunlit, the other in the wall which faced the road. There was a larder, too, with a small latticed window in the north wall. The lower part of this wall was damp with fungus, being below road-level. It was a relief to get outside again.

The wash-house opposite the kitchen door had a big sink in it, probably taken out of the Old Castle when Colonel Trelawney had bought and restored the property in 1911. The window frame was brittle with dry-rot. This was obviously the place for a kitchen, small but compact and labour-saving. Above it we would have a bathroom. The north windows of the main room, or parlour, would be blocked up, and the good frames used to extend the present southern window. Everything should be light and airy: no more gloom and decadence. Our farmhouse and our land should become part of Merrie England once more.

'We'll have a door where the window is, and a big window in the opposite wall, facing east and the rising sun. There'll be an electric water pump and electric oven, but this time we won't

try and build it ourselves. We'll find a good local builder, and tell him what we want, and then get an estimate and a plan and leave it all to him. No more bricks, planks, lime, sand, nails, creosote, felt, tiles, scrim, plaster, and other muck.'

'We haven't been upstairs!'

'Come on!'

We returned into the cottage. There was a dark wooden lobby immediately inside, which would be ripped down, we agreed. Also the larder would come out, making one large room. There was another room leading off the parlour, and entering, we saw a pleasant panelled room and the same beam continuing across the ceiling.

'Why, look, there's a second staircase,' said Loetitia, 'one up from here, and another at the other end of the parlour. Oh, I would like this little room for my very own, away from the noise of the children. It's been a dream, all my life, to have a room of my own.'

It was surprising to learn that Loetitia wanted to get away from the children. Once she had told me they were all her life. Was I growing into the uncomprehending husband of fiction, so wrapped up in himself that he didn't realize how others were feeling? Anyway, this should be Loetitia's boudoir.

'I'll have my writing desk here,' she said, 'and some of the family pictures on the wall. The panelling ought to be painted white.'

'Oh, do you think so? It looks so nice now, in its brown varnish, like a pitch-pine *gasthaus* in the Tyrol.'

'But it would be so dark, wouldn't it, for a boudoir?'

'It's just right for a smoking-room, isn't it?'

Loetitia sighed. 'I suppose I shall never, never get my own little room.'

'Of course you will. It's your house. You are the mortgagor. Why not foreclose? I should, if I were you, before the whole damned thing goes bust.'

'Don't you worry, it won't go bust, I think you've done splendidly.'

This was generous of Loetitia.

We went upstairs. There were three bedrooms, leading one into another. Again lattice windows, and a plum-tree growing

against the wall. With glass tiles let into the sloping roof, these rooms would glow with light. The floors of two were rotten in places, but after creosoting them, a new floor could be 'clad' over the old boards.

We went down the other flight of stairs, into the sombre kitchen.

'We'll take out this range, and have an open hearth for wood, of course. And hack off that old plaster and reface it with water-repellent cement.'

'I could polish up these old tiles on the floor.'

'When we have Mrs. Hammet's cottage next door, the children can have their meals there. And the bedroom will make four all told. I wish the third cottage, next door, where old Billy lives, was ours. Then I could live there. Still, one can't have everything. They've got a right to draw water from the well, so if we enclose it, we'll have to put a pipe down to them, I suppose. What, are you itching, too?'

I myself had been moving my shoulder-blades against my shirt, rubbing my thighs, knuckling my ribs. Now Loetitia was doing the same thing. 'I think perhaps we ought to drink more orange juice——' I was saying, when she cried out:

'Oh, dear! All over you! And me too! Dozens, hundreds!'

Thousands, indeed. Small brown insects were crawling up my trousers, hopping over her shoes, leaping from my coat lapels to my tie and thence to my neck, my ears, my throat, and head. One crawled across Loetitia's nose, and she brushed it off with her hand, on the back of which three others were moving. It was hopeless to try and beat them off. They were swarming along the beam overhead, and across the tiled floor. Tiny pricking all over my body told me that it was useless to resist further: Napoleon's army was victorious.

For weeks anyone in either of the three cottages—Bugg Houses had been rechristened Fox, Owl, and South Cottages—was liable to mutter, scratch, and begin a hasty search for vermin. On my return to the cottage I attacked the fleas with a rose-sprayer containing a mixture of soapy water and paraffin; but it was not sufficient; and as my bare legs (I was wearing shorts) became covered, I poured paraffin down them, and rubbed it in. The fleas died; but the acrid oil choked the pores

of my skin, and made me feel sick. The next visit was with ten pounds of sulphur and several old saucers. I lit the sulphur and watched the fumes rising behind the closed lattices until an opaque brown fog hid everything; and returning next day, when it was dissipated, found them still alive and hopping about the floor.

So I returned again with more sulphur, and a pail of paste, a brush, scissors, and several old newspapers. The range was covered with paper sheets, also the cracks of the casement window frames. The broken ceiling upstairs was made air-tight, and the minute fireplace in the end bedroom. It took several hours to seal up all the window cracks, both inside and outside, but at last it was done and I could light the sulphur in the bowls standing in every room.

In the morning thousands of corpses, bleached to a shrivelled yellow, lay on the floor.

'The last of Napoleon's army,' said Loetitia. 'Ugh! I still find myself wanting to scratch.'

The builder came in. He looked around. He drew a plan and wrote out a specification, bathroom and hot-cupboard, larder, water-closets (Oh, luxury!), open hearths, large windows, new floors, new plaster and fresh distempered walls . . . for £330.

Just at this time the barley market crashed, and I saw that if we spent this money (out of the bank overdraft) there would be no wage-reserve (again by overdraft) for the following year.

I met the new owner of the Old Castle, and mentioned the matter of the pipe-line to his cottage. Would he care to consider having a pipe laid on, as we wished to cover-in the well which, incidentally, was foul and needed cleaning. My neighbour replied that it would save trouble if I bought the cottage, and forthwith offered it to me. We shook hands then and there, and I was the owner of a small cottage, with half an acre of garden going down to the river. Our problem of accommodation was solved.

A month or two later I was able to do him a good turn, when an Ipswich firm offered me £600 a year in royalties for three years, for a lease of the chalk quarry opposite the cart-shed. The machinery working would have disturbed the quietness of the

Old Castle; and as he was ill and worried at the time, I refused the offer. In this I was perhaps foolish, for it meant elementary education for the children and a continued sixteen-hour working day for Loetitia. But it was wrong, in my view; it would have been the commercial exploitation of a beautiful part of England. And there was already a large ground-chalk plant working in a vast quarry near Whelk, which served all local needs.

Nevertheless, I intended to make a comfortable home for Loetitia out of Walnut Tree Cottage (née Flea). There was a young bricklayer living in the village with whom I had spoken about the long time taken over the three cottages, when he had declared that I had been badly served. He seemed a nice fellow, and together we went to look over the new place. I asked him if he could give me an estimate, but he scratched his head and looked like a small boy in school asked why he hadn't done his arithmetic. At last he said:

'See you here, sir, the way I work is to charge my time at one and three an hour and tenpence an hour for my mate. I won't see you wrong that way, nor will I rob you. If you like to supply materials, I'll use them as best I may, or I'll get them, just as you please.'

These words did not come easily from him; I could see he thought I suspected him; I felt I could trust him, for his very nervousness.

He worked hard and well. Soon the road windows were out and filled in with bricks; the new south window extended along most of the southern wall, with a window seat below; the ugly larder pulled away, new tiles replacing cracked ones, the damp plaster hacked off and in its place waterproof cement keyed with smooth new plaster. Squares of glass tiles in the bedrooms flooded them with light. A village carpenter came in and laid new wooden floors, with a speed and skill that gladdened me. While George the bricklayer built with flints and bricks a wall into the western side of the archway, with a window for the new larder, the carpenter, who worked on a neighbouring farm all the day, made shelves to my pattern and fitted frames and doors to the kitchen and built the new bathroom below the old wash-house. The roof of the original wash-house was sound,

and it seemed a pity to break it down to build a bathroom above it apart from the extra cost. Did it matter coming into the open air to get to the bathroom, I asked Loetitia? In case of illness it might be awkward, she said; adding, Well, we mustn't get ill, that's all.

George worked swiftly when he did work. The trouble was he was loyal to many people, all of whom had jobs for him. So he was sometimes away for weeks, but always letting me know first. We had only one row, which served to get rid of a misunderstanding in me about him; thereafter it was always pleasant to talk with him and watch his handiwork.

I went to several auctions of bankrupt builders' stock and plant, with the Silver Eagle and trailer, sometimes making a hundred-mile journey in a day, and bought closets, sinks, basins, a bath, lead piping, wood, a barrel of bitumen, iron rods, window frames, and many other useful things. I was tired of auctions and building; the constant material details were choking my imagination.

So let's give a party, we said. The place wasn't finished, but we could put the guests in the new cottage, in the caravan, or on camp-beds in the granary; anywhere. There was a case of Algerian wine which had been bought ten years before, among the boxes of first-editions and manuscripts probably mouldering on the damp brick floor, or by now tattered by mice for their nests. Since the cats had left the granary, when we had gone, mice had lived there, and a solitary rat. The rat did no damage, but seemed to spend his time sitting on top of one of my riding boots when he was not nibbling the cork of an empty wine bottle.

We decided to have the party in the granary, where during the bitter days of the previous winter we had shivered before the stove. The eleven-foot refectory table was still there, and as chairs we lugged up the tea-chests of books. Several candles were stuck on the table, which bore a cold turkey, a ham, roast pheasants, potatoes in their jackets, a salad, with our own butter from Dolly, the first shorthorn that calved a month before, a home-baked bread of the full wheaten berry ground in our own mill in the chaff-house. The turkey was one that Loetitia had reared, and I had shot the pheasants flying out of Fox Covert

wood while the three elder children acted as beaters. For 'afters' we had a fruit salad, with cream; a mince pie, fifteen inches by twelve inches, and some home-made cream cheese.

Loetitia's cousin Mary drove up from Surrey, bringing my friend John; and late at night, in a thunderstorm, I drove the Silver Eagle, without the hood, thirty miles to Norwich Station and picked up another friend who had come from Fleet Street. I had my silver bootlegger flask, bought in Florida four years before, filled with whisky and we drank a draught and then drove home through the rain. Across the wooded heaths on the long straight road we drove, the heavy rain splaying across the windscreen and streaming off the sides. It was like being under a waterfall, our faces wetted by splashes bouncing back from the main roar of the elements. Neither of us wore hats. He was singing as we tore homewards at a modest sixty-five—all that the Silver Eagle would do now. We got home at midnight, to sit before a fire and drink peasant-soup from earthenware bowls.

The next morning we went for a walk on the marshes, and heard the triple whistle of the redshank, and debated whether the word *curlew* should be pronounced after the hoarse throaty sweetness of its call. The countryman called the bird *kr-loo*; the 'educated' townsman pronounced it as spelt, *cur-leu*, the second syllable as a diphthong. A small matter; but it seemed to me symbolic of the entire state of Britain. My friend, his face pale by having to work in London, and often until midnight, was pathetically eager to learn the name of every bird he saw.

He was of the generation which had been children during the Great War; and talking with him, I had the feeling that I had always when with men of his age: a feeling that despite a superficial modernity of mental freedom his mentality was pre-war. He was cynical almost to bitterness, as though constantly oppressed and frustrated. He believed in nothing, except the objective truth, which was coloured by his reading of many left-wing books. He was typical of millions of enlightened, modern-minded young men. Evil was something seen in the acts of others only; the reformatory spirit was impotent, except in words and phrases of declamation. He thought Mosley, survivor of the war generation in rebellion against the grandfathers' mentality and system, was a pathological case, in effect a mere

mountebank; and that I was a crank to believe that the only hope lay in a classless, unified nation inspired to build, within the Empire, a fine new co-operative Socialism. It was fruitless to argue with him, hopeless as in 1919 to argue with elderly civilians who blamed the weary young soldiers for not fighting for another year. In this negative mental attitude, held by most of the young and by all of the old, I saw crater-zones in the cornfields, and another generation of Flanders' poppies. I desired town children to be truly free to hear the hoarse sweetness of the *kr-loo*, to see corn growing beside new fast motor roads, to watch salmon jumping by London Bridge, and the only thistles—rare plants—growing in their special beds in Kew Gardens. I wanted to see new villages as beautiful as the ancient art of heraldry. I lived for the age of sunlight and authentic pedigree. I wanted that age to start now; first as an idea in men's minds, then action to follow the idea. And because of this dominant idea, I was a crank, and becoming a bore.

So let us eat, drink, and be merry. Here is the granary, lit by fifty candles, and the refectory table, polished by Loetitia, Mary, and Stella the maid, laden with all sorts of good things. There at one end sits a famous painter of horses, waving a chicken-bone and shouting about the iniquities of the art dealers and their brothers, sons, cousins—'our rulers', he calls them. Beside him is daughter Margaret, wearing a cowboy's hat, her dark eyes sparkling and her dusky cheeks flushed with excitement; and then my friend John, who for years was haunted by the crater-zones—once one of the Bright Young People, coming to youth as the war ended, the Lost Generation that had all the reaction but none of the action, of the crater-zones. Once he too was a rebel, but now has acquired balance, and feels that life is to be enjoyed, and if to-morrow we are to die, then let us die with a laugh on our lips. A gracious creature, with a fine sense of form; here's to you, John, gosh this Algerian wine, warming all day in the granary snugly heated by the stove, makes one feel fine. There's little John, my John, wearing his grandfather's old grey otter-hunting hat, which sits well down over his ears, making him look like the Mad Hatter. We are all wearing odd hats, taken from the loft over the granary, collected at various places of the earth. Big John wears a negro's cotton-picking

cap, with big peak like a jockey's; someone else has my ancient moth-eaten silk hat, much battered by old days with the Stevenstone hounds in North Devon. Loetitia has the green deer-stalker, and Mary wears a cowgirl's wide-brimmed straw from Georgia. And the guest of honour, who sits eating heartily, hungrily, after a 121-mile journey from Buckinghamshire, wears not a Scots bonnet as when last I saw him, but a farmer's straw on the back of his head. He has to return in an hour's time, alas, for on Monday he begins his new film, which is about an old schoolmaster who has no life outside his school . . . for whom life is memory. He will make a fine job of it, creating a shy, gentle character ranging from thirty years to over eighty, for he is sense and sensibility itself; and he has come all this way to see our farm, being hungry for earth, as so many men are becoming in this last decade of the Old Europe. He tells me he heard the broadcasts about the farm, and had to come to see something unusual, a real man of action, of positive achievement. Instead he finds what he half-suspected: a man like himself, who has achieved out of frustration and hope, forcing himself beyond himself continually. I, too, am surprised, though I should have known that the truth in his work has to be paid for. He sees deeply, feels keenly. There is fortitude in being with such a man. Pity he cannot stay! What, only an overcoat for the long journey, and the night so cold, and going to learn some of the lines for *Mr. Chips* on the way back? No, sir, you must sleep, and here's a sheepskin to wrap round your legs, keep it, tribute for that splendid performance in *The Ghost Goes West*.

The car glides away in the starry night, and feeling exhilaration that is not wholly due to the wine, I return inside the granary. Fifty candles make a room hot, even one with a broken window space still stuffed with last year's sacks. There's Tommy the cat peering in, sniffing the smells of cooked pig and bird, then fleeing away in shadow. Tommy's been wild again for the best part of a year now.

Tommy-tommy the children called him. I wonder if he heard the sounds of singing from the Entries wood, where he lives on rabbits, and came down, drawn by the plaintiveness of his nature? Or was it the light in the cracks of the door and between the stuffed sacks?

On the carpenter's bench within they are sitting, arms linked, singing a chorus. I wish I could join in with the singing; but I'm not made that way. I'm like Tommy, always living on the sharp edges of sight and sound. Tommy lives in the wood, and is wild; and it's no good being sharp if you live in a house with others whose steadiness is due to their slowness.

Seeing Tommy-tommy in the starlight, fleeing away, brings back memories of the old granary life. There wasn't any singing in those days. Tommy-tommy enjoyed his life there, and grew fat. When we moved to the cottages, he missed us, and hung about for weeks outside the granary, and in the chalk quarry, wondering on the change in his life. We took him to the cottages, but he clawed himself out of our arms, and ran away, the irises of his eyes wide with fear of the unknown. Thereafter he went hunting in the woods, but still haunted the farm buildings. Long after we ceased to see him, his plaintive going-wild meow was imitated by the starlings in the trees over the chalk quarry. When the winter had passed, the cry became part of their communal spring song; but Tommy-tommy no longer walked to greet me, tail in air and a-twitch, uttering his reproachful where-have-you-been mew, before turning over on his head and rolling on his back—a trick taught him in kittenhood by Jimmy.

Tommy-tommy was a shy, swift, fleeing young animal when first I saw him. Jimmy had brought the two kittens to catch mice and rats. Tommy-tommy and the other cat lived in the turnip house. At regular intervals they visited the bullock yards, the pigs' pens, the granary, hay-barn, corn-barn, stables, in their round of hunting. At first they caught mice; then growing bigger, they took small rats, which they killed and ate quickly. When we came to live in the granary Tommy-tommy used to slink through a hole in the flapping door, ready to flee like a shadow at the slightest quick movement. After a week he did not flee immediately, but mewed huskily; then becoming used to human movements, squatted on the mat by the stove, ready at any moment to run away. After a further week, he was made sleek by the food we gave him, and tame. He stayed in at night. Sometimes during the morning he brought young rats and laid them at my feet.

One day he brought a live buck rabbit bigger than himself. We saw him walking up the new-made road, fore-feet widely straddled, dragging the rabbit, which he held by the back of its neck. Sometimes he trod on it, and fell over. With pertinacity he dragged it over the threshold, and only released his hold when it was laid on the mat by the stove. 'Good boy, Tommy-tommy,' and he walked about purring, tail in the air, before rolling over on his back.

The cat did not want to eat that rabbit. He had brought it for the community. He lived there with us until we left, and then was to be seen waiting, day after day, by the closed granary door. When Loetitia fed the chickens, the cat appeared, and ate with them, but uneasily. It was then that those greasy, proletarian, oil-hued treetop tinpan-alleyites, the starlings, ever on the listen for new sounds and noises (like the commercial dance songsters, they have no music of their own, beyond clucking or percussive noises) learned the plaintive, nostalgic mew which I will hear long after the cat is gone.

For Tommy-tommy will not return. He will grow like the old wild cat I saw for an instant on the edge of Hang High wood a week ago. Tommy-tommy is already half-way to the complete shyness of the wild. There he is, staring at me in the light of the rising moon, crouching under a bramble bush. He remains staring while I call his name. His mouth opens, but no sound comes. As I walk towards him, he creeps under the bush, and I cannot see him. Man and animal are finally severed.

The half-impersonal skill of rat and rabbit killing has changed to the silent fury of full-power killing. He will never return. A sudden charge of shot from a gamekeeper's gun . . . and all that will remain of Tommy-tommy will be a woodland patch of violets larger than the others: and a plaintive cadence from the starlings in the trees above the quarry.

I thought that he would not return; but I was wrong. When the last bottle had been drained, the last guttering candle snuffed, when the *Ballad of the Café Royal*, with the encores of *The Chef*, and *The Pork Sandwiches*, had been declaimed by the artist, and the last song ended; when we had gone home arm in arm, and found our ways to various beds, couches, and palliasses;

when the granary was silent, so that the rapid tic-tic-tic-tic of the wood-beetles in rafters and beams was audible, then a whiskered head was pushed under the sacks of the empty window-space, and a nose explored the wandering airs of the room. A light leap on to the table, a swift prowling survey, and Tommy-tommy turned his head sideways to gnaw the remains of a pheasant. Soon another head was thrust under the sack, and a third. Noises of crunching, gnawing, and husky swallowing came in the darkness. The cats of Old Castle Farm were having a party.

When they were gone, pulling themselves with difficulty through the hole (I found three colours of cat-hair there next noon) the rats ran in. How many came I know not, but when next I opened the door and looked in I saw an incredible litter spread over the table. The ham was but a big bone among hundreds of lesser bones, all picked clean and scattered over table, bench, and floor. The rats had had their party also, and when they were gone, the mice had finished what was left.

Chapter Forty-five

THE BARLEY MARKET CRASHES



My Editor had printed some articles about the collapse of the barley market in 1938, and had made one in particular interesting by adding a photostat of the envelope in which it was sent, with my note, 'There's a hell of a lot of angry talk up here among farmers.' Since the newspaper had about ten million readers it is probable that it helped to start the agitation which ended with a march on London. At least, it was supposed to be a march; and this is what occurred.

A meeting of protest was announced to take place in a hall in Norwich, one Saturday. About a thousand farmers were present. On the platform sat five M.P.s and some others, including a great landowner, Lord Caister. Also there was another nobleman, younger, who was in the Ministry of Agriculture. For a young man he looked too fat; a soft pale town face, contrasting with the lean, simple, sunburnt faces of the farmers in the well of the hall.

I do not propose to make a long description of this local happening. Many men spoke, uttering the phrases and revealing the attitudes made familiar by a thousand repetitions in English life. About the strongest thing said was that if things didn't happen soon, the five M.P.'s might expect to have fewer votes at next election. The farmers listened and occasionally shouted. They shouted more when the junior Minister from Whitehall got up and said that the question of barley price was having the Ministry's deep consideration, and he would make a report recommending that the subsidy on barley be increased. This caused an uproar of shouts and laughter, and an old man cried out, 'Don't you know, master, that there ain't no subsidy on

barley?' Lord Caister got on his feet and said, amidst silence, 'My friend made a slip; of course he meant that there should be a subsidy on barley, as well as the one on wheat as at present.' But the impression remained that the young man was ignorant. He spoke a few more lame sentences, then fidgeting on the platform, explained that he owned eighty thousand acres in the North of England, and knew the land more from the landlord's than from the farmer's side. A week or two later he gave up politics.

Lord Caister said that it must be remembered that farming was only a small part of England's greatness. The nation, he declared, lived by overseas trade and those who saw the national economy as a whole knew the very delicate balance of the entire structure. Thus in some parts of the world it was necessary to burn wheat and other crops in order to maintain the economic structure. Lord Caister had eight centuries of land-owning behind his family. I wondered how many years lay before his family. He sat down, having justified things as they were.

Moving slowly out of the hall, amidst other farmers, I was oppressed by the weight of impotence and disintegration among us. There was no unity. The Farmers' Union speakers had no authority. They were timid, respectful, trying to be nice to everyone and everything. There was no leadership.

There were other meetings of protest. They ended the same way. Ragged words, shouts of protest, many having their little say; and things remaining as before.

I was invited to speak at one meeting. It was arranged by an artificial-manure merchant. He said he was getting various speakers. Hundreds of farmers, he declared, had asked him to arrange the meeting. They were tired of the other meetings. They wanted to march to London.

The meeting arranged by the artificial-manure merchant was announced for 7.30 p.m. one night in Norwich. It began just before 8 p.m. The chairman started by saying he had called the meeting only because he had been asked to call it. He was merely serving the farmers' interest. He had no barley to sell, he was not a farmer; only because so many hundreds had asked him to do so, had he called the meeting. Many knew his face, he declared; and no doubt when later he came round for their

orders for fertilizers, they would remember it. Not that he wanted to push his wares; he was impartial; he merely had called the meeting, etc.; he went on like that until 8.30 p.m., when at last he sat down and then got up again to explain why he had called the meeting. He believed in democracy, and therefore it was a democratic meeting, and also he believed in tolerance, and therefore he had asked speakers of various shades of opinion to address them. He himself had no opinions about politics; but merely had called the meeting, etc., etc.

At 8.40 p.m. the first speaker got up. At first I thought he was a dialect comedian of some B.B.C. regional station. He spoke broadly, and made many jokes, ending up by saying he was a gardener and knew nought 'bout barley, save its connection with beer, glorious beer. As there was no bad beer there could not be any bad barley, he said. He went on like that, hopping from one thing to another like a homeless flea, for nearly twenty minutes. He was followed by a Communist, who told about the new housing schemes and communal farms in Russia, and in the midst of his address someone shouted out, 'Will Joe Stalin buy our barley or not?' The speaker said he was coming to barley, but as at 9.15 p.m. he was only at the Tolpuddle Martyrs, the chairman interrupted him. On his feet once more, the chairman declared that he was impartial, and had called the meeting not for them to hear any one point of view, but all points of view. I had an impulse to jump down from the platform and run out.

The next speaker was a retired colonel who had come all the way from Devon to speak to them. He had a Fiscal Reform Policy, similar to the Social Credit system. He spoke about the burden of rates on the land, and the parasitism of money charges lying as dead-weight on living industry and work. Thus Brighton, he said, might have had five promenades in two hundred years; and to pay for the construction of each promenade, money was borrowed. The capital sums were never paid back; only the interest was paid. Even though the first, second, and third and fourth promenades had been pulled down and rebuilt, with three successive loans, those loans still remained, and each generation had to bear the burden of interest on them. Thus the banks, who took their commissions for the loans,

were becoming the masters of the country, and were slowly paralysing life. It was a struggle between loan capitalism and productive capitalism.

He stopped at 10.10 p.m., and several farmers reached for their hats and walked out. It was my turn to speak. My carefully prepared speech was forgotten.

'If you want to alter things, you must do it yourselves! No-one else will alter them for you! Nobody else cares!' I shouted. 'All you've heard to-night is true, but it is not the final truth, which is, March to London and force the City of London to capitulate and so save Britain from either the biggest slump in its history, or alternatively from another European war. The writing is on the walls, literally all over England.'

I jumped off the platform and went out. In a near-by hotel I met the retired colonel with the fiscal policy, who said he had come from Devon at his own expense to help the farmers, but when he was there, he saw they were not starving, as he had been led to suppose. They weren't even hard hit, he said; most of them looked prosperous, and the mass of new cars outside proved it. 'You'll do nothing with them yet,' he said. 'We in England haven't suffered enough. In fact, we haven't suffered at all. But it is coming.' His eyes took on a far-away look; and I left him, to drive the thirty miles home in the winter's dark.

Someone took up the idea of a march to London. It may have been the artificial-manure merchant. I saw advertisements in the local paper, requiring names and telling assembly places. Tickets were 10s. each, including lunch. Apparently they were marching by motor-coach. Then I read that only selected farmers were going. The march had been taken over by the Farmers' Union. A new Minister of Agriculture had been appointed. He was the chairman of the Farmers' Union.

In the end two hundred reliable (i.e. prosperous) men were chosen to represent the case of the East Anglian farmers. Others could go if they wanted to, but they weren't in the Deputation, which was to march through selected streets in London to a hall, over a mile from Westminster, and there to present an address and a bouquet to the new Minister, and hear his reassuring words that everything that could be done might be done.

Photographs appeared in a few daily papers afterwards, of farmers in their best clothes wearing corn sprays in their hats, or slung with bunches of carrots, turnips, and sheaves (by Clarkson?)¹ It was like a small section of the Lord Mayor's Show, and did no harm to any vested interest.

The Prime Minister made a speech at Kettering, which told the truth: that if farming became prosperous, if the land were made fertile and in good heart, the overseas business interests of Britain would suffer.

It was an honest speech. More farms came into the market, more farmers into the bankruptcy court; but nobody cared.

That is not true. Somebody did care.

(i)

*Holly Colley,
Norwich,
Nfk.*

Mr Williamson Sir

My daughter told me of your Speech and also I red The Express off yesterday, Mon. and I hav just read your Articile on The situa- tion not only on Barley, but on the general outlook as well, I wish everyone, would look at it like you do I have been connected with Farming and Small, interest, all my life, Also I have an only son in New South Wales Aus, and he complain off the way our legislators let them down. Had not the War started we six off us where on the point off joining him, we could all of us pay our fares, but as Geo could not guaratee his Father employment, we had to abandon the Sckeme, then came the War and off course my boy joined up, came over fought, when back married and has land, but does not seem very prosperous yet. He left Norwich as his boss made a mess of things. Why we have to be burdened with the riffraff of refugis comes over me, and it vexes me cruel to see fine hefty British men on the dole and there are millions of acres want cultaviting in this England off ours and Our Empire. I am 79, a widow 8 years farmer's wife fifty years, 14 years in Devon. I say men and women where much happier on less money, because food cost less, I have my 10s. a week and I live alone bar holidays when I have grand children to see me. When you could by the best parts off a pig 6d. a lb. there was more for folks to eat, I asked the price of a sheep head 1s. 6d. I have bought a whole sheep's head and pluck for a 1s. and half Bullocks

¹ A theatrical costumier.

cheek for the same. They tell us to produce more, What is the good if you cannot sell it; My Grandfather sold up and went to America 70 years ago because rabbits took off his crops and could not get recompense, he farmed in Somerset and I have watched the apples being crushed into pulp for cider. He did all that with a water wheel, which may be there now, it was a few years ago. Hope you will make a success off the Farming, writing, and Happiness with wife and children. I have four children, 7 grandchildren, one in Aussey.

I remain yours respectfully

MRS. SMITH.

(ii)

*Mornington Terrace,
NW.1.*

Dear Sir,

I was greatly interested and moved by your article in this morning's *Daily Express*.

I am 41 years of age next birthday and born of Scotch and Cornish farming stock on the outskirts of the London of those days which led to the open fields. In those days of my boyhood the urge seem to be in me because I was never happier than when with a shovel I was digging holes or such like. I remember then after the Boer War the unemployed marching round the streets with tin whistles and a drum begging and the occasion when they commandeered a piece of waste land and tilled it but was ejected by the police. In those days there used to be a Mr. Pooley going about in an old stage coach preaching a back to the land movement I can picture him now with top hat and long fine beard shouting back to the land and a joker catching him full in the face with a piece of mud saying the lands come to you Pooley. I have also stood in those days at the Dock head off by the Beckton gas works and seen the ships laden with emigrants bound for Australia. I also remember the strikes of those days I was only working a couple of years or so when the war came along and at 17 years of age found myself on Gallipoli. In all those years I've mentioned we were more or less far more patriotic and not eaten up with this internationalism as the people or at least some are to-day although it was foreign eggs and frozen meat then and anything English we look upon as being for those in a better position than ourselves although I as a boy could not quite see the fairness of it all. Those were the days when the people were beginning to put their faith in the labour party and we still had some hold on the markets of the world. After the war in which I never expected anything out of the ordinary except a better and more united Englan

we have the state of affairs you mentioned. For over 16 years I have worked in and around the city racing about collecting the Dividends due on the various loans and moneys which have gone abroad while our own country cries out for support by the investment of funds etc. to build up our industries.

The financial system was never meant to be used as one huge international system for the gamblers irrespective of whom they hurt and there obligations to there fellow countrymen. I am fed up and sick of it all when I see these high strung nervous racketeers many who when walking through the streets talk to themselves. After 16 years I am fed up and the urge comes to leave this stifling soulless unholy cesspool of bribery and corruption and with a little money I have saved and a small pension I am fortunate in having through the aid of a building society am going with my brother in law to take a small place in Somerset. Now I wonder if our government cant see there way clear to help us they can at least leave us alone if not I swear by the Gods that Ill march the farmers and boys of the country to London to recapture the soul of our nation.

Yours faithfully,

WM. EDWARDS RICHARDSON.

P.S. With my compliments and permission to use as you think fit in your great work.

(iii)

*St. Martins Place,
W.C.2.*

The Only Plan

Dear Henry Williamson,

All that blather about land without a single word as to how the people can use it or get it. Let me, in a few words, *tell you* how it can be done,—called *THE RENT PLAN*. Ever heard of it?

You reverse the rent position. Instead of the landlords receiving rent for our land, they PAY RENT for every inch they hold. Full economic rent, to the treasury. Whether the land is in use or not. What will they do then? (What do we do now?) We do not hold the land, because we have to pay the rent to a private landholder.

They would not hold the land if they had to pay the rent. DO you see the idea? In five minutes the market would be flooded with every kind of land. Price would go. Men would be rushing on every bus, boat, car, or train to take it up. (We have always wanted the land, it was the price which held us back.) Laughing, happy, excited people rushing to their birthright. You ask 'when are you going to do something about the unemployment,' Man, I've been doing it for

years. The solution is simple. Restore the land for heaven's sake get those stupid landlords with their silly crowns out of the way. NO RENT—NO LORDS. Collect land rent for public revenue and abolish rates and taxes. What is every dept in the House of Commons?—taxation! What is the power behind the LORDS (let us prey) OUR land rent. Why are the people poor? Because they are robbed. Why are they unemployed? Because they are not allowed to use their hands and brains. RESTORE OUR LAND by the rent plan and abolish Taxes.

BERYL EASTWOOD.

(iv)

‘Two distinct and conflicting mentalities are preparing to battle for the mastery of the world, one of which is the mind of progress inspired to great exertions by the agonies which surround it, infused by the grandeur of belief in the great destiny of men, and determined to win through at all costs to a nobler order of the world . . . the other sees man as a hunted being doomed to destruction by his own heredity, and a fugitive, panic-stricken, stumbling through the haunted twilight to extermination. I ask you, on the other hand, to see man with all his faults as the immortal child of Evolution, turning his back on his ape-like origins, guided surely by the fostering hand of his Creator—mankind turning its anguished face towards a new and happier order, illuminated by the radiance of an ultimate beauty and an ineffable peace.’

Chapter Forty-six

NORFOLK TARKIES



Before winter, with its rains and frosts, should settle on the meadows and fields, we had begun to drain the farthest meadow, called on old maps Saint John's Pasture. This was about $9\frac{1}{2}$ acres, and most of it was under water four months of the year. The ditch under the Hang High wood was choked with mud and fallen trees, and the drains which, wandering over the pasture, emptied into the ditch, were overgrown with poa grass and trodden-in by cattle. The grazing was, in the local phrase, water-slain.

With the light trailer behind the tractor, and the tumbrils drawn by our horses Gilbert and Blossom, we hauled the mud into heaps on Spong Breck, the poor-grass field rising above the meadows. We ploughed out the turf of the wandering drains, lifted it into the tumbrils, and set it in heaps beside the mud. Spong Breck was 15 acres. At the rate we were going, we would not be able to put 40 tons on each acre, as I had planned; but only 20. In a week four of us managed to heap about 60 tons on the lower three acres; then the rains came, and the tractor wheels dug themselves in the slope of the gateway, and the horses began to slip. Also the roots of mangold on ten acres of Fox Covert must be topped and lifted before the frost damaged them. One-fifth of Spong Breck was done. Later we would spread the heaps and watch the dwarf wild-white clover plants spreading and growing stronger, as they took the humus and the lime to their fibrous roots. The chalk spread on the field would last about thirty-five years, since it was dissolved and washed out of the top-soil into the sub-soil at the rate of seven hundredweight an acre every year, and we had spread 12 tons

per acre. It was satisfying to walk over the field, amidst the lumps that the frost would soon crack.

During the past summer our little herd of nine heifers had been increased by four steers bought at a local auction for £7 each. They had Saint John's Pasture and Mary's Meadow below, and in the noon heat and early afternoon usually had sought the cool air blowing across the upland field. The gate into the meadow was permanently open. The beasts used to gather on the stony crest of the lower portion of the field, where the moving air-currents cooled them and drove away the warble and other flies which beset them. There they rested and ruminated, and their droppings enriched the stony patch. In five years, I thought, the character of the Spong Breck soil will be regenerated; for while the mud, the cattle droppings, the chalk, and the rotted turf would make only temporary additions to its fertility, much of the diggings from the drains were clay which less than a century before had been under the tides of the sea. The frosts would reduce to fineness the summer-hard lumps, the air add nitrogen, and the living clay would marry with the light soil, stiffen it, and give it strength.

We cut the neglected and overgrown hedges between the pasture and the Hang High wood, and during my absence the men dragged tons of thorny branches into the wood. When I came back, we spent a day dragging them through the new ditch again, and on to the pasture. There they were burned, the big branches first being set aside for firewood, two tons in all. The men did not understand that the woods of Old Castle Farm were no longer to be regarded as mere dumping places for unwanted stuff, as they had been during the decades of neglect since the war. They thought my action in clearing them as eccentric and wasteful, like my insistence that the new road should be kept free of horse-dung and that the cow-dung falling on the concrete slabs by the yards should be swept away occasionally. As for the cow-house, although water was laid on, and there was a rubber hose, I failed to get the concrete floor washed. I spoke about it many times; but it was too much to ask for apparently. The stains of the droppings of the cattle of the last tenant, and probably of the tenant before him, remained on the floor. The truth was that all worked very hard, and only whe

the farm was properly based and organized could such 'luxuries' be expected. I am not patient by nature; but I can endure.

The time came to sell our turkeys. Loetitia had reared about fifty, some under hens, others under the hen turkeys, called poults. Four poults and a stag-bird had arrived in two tea-chests, perforated with holes, the previous February.

When I lifted them off the trailer, and let them out of their prisons, all five had uttered subdued baby-cheeping cries. They were afraid, and tired after the twenty-four-hour journey by train. I cast some corn on the ground, and they began to pick it up. Then a tough old Rhode Island cock, used to fighting, saw them and immediately half-ran, half-flew, at the stag-bird by the tea-chest. The stag saw him when he was about five yards off, and acted immediately. He drew himself up, swelled his chest, flushed red, then livid; and when the cock was about to spur him he ran forward and spat. At the same time he shot out his right foot and pushed the cock in the face. Then he ran after the cock, who fled. Thereupon the stag made a gobbling noise, and strutted about his new territory.

On March the 21st, the destined day, his four wives began to lay. They had made nests among the rising nettles. Each laid eighteen eggs, which Jimmy removed from the nests. Later they laid again, a second clutch of eighteen eggs. These also were taken away. After consultation with the stag-bird, they decided to lay once more. The elaborate rite of treading was performed. In time each produced another nestful of eighteen eggs. This third and final laying was untouched. The poults sat on them, amid nettles nearly three feet tall. Wild pheasants nested near them.

One day I saw a dead jackdaw lying in a corn bin. Jimmy had shot it. 'Why?' I asked, adding that I liked to see the daws nesting in the chalk quarry. 'They are my friends. Don't shoot any more,' I said. A few days later Jimmy took me to see a nestful of eggshells.

'Who did it?' I inquired angrily. 'Your friends,' said Jimmy. He hung the shot bird on a pole, and the others kept clear.

We kept the eggs, turning them every day, in an old German bomb box, which I had brought home from the Hindenburg

Line in 1917. We waited for the hens to go broody, but they would not. The first and second laying of turkey eggs remained in the box until foster-mothers could be found for them. We had to wait a long time, and when at last they were all set half of them did not hatch.

On Jimmy's suggestion a hen's egg was placed among each clutch, so that, when they hatched, a more vigorous leader-chick would show the little turkeys how to eat their food. 'A tarkey chick is too innocent to peck, until that's larned,' said Jimmy.

The little turkey chicks grew quickly. The danger was from wet and cold during the first few days of their life. So we shut them in a wire-netting enclosure, on short grass. Even so three or four shivered to death after a rain-storm. They belonged to a poult who was a poor mother. At night she always tried to get under another hen turkey's wing, as though she were little again. Often I saw her head and half of her neck tucked under her roosting neighbour's feathers, while her own chicks huddled around her, the smallest squeezed to the outside. It is not only human beings who suffer from an *Œdipus* complex.

We inoculated the little turkeys against liver-disease by injecting serum into the big vein under the wing-shoulder. None died after that. Soon they were big and roaming free in the fields and woods.

All during summer the turkeys wandered about the farm coming morning and evening to their special feeding places. They could fly, and soon were roosting in the highest trees of Fox Covert.

The day before we cut the barley of Hang High field, a wind sprang up and knocked many of the ears on the ground. On Twenty-one Acres bearded barley heads lay thick as sun bleached prawns, one on every six square inches of field. We reckoned between four and five tons of barley lay on the ground. As our small seeds had failed, owing to a poor seed bed due to the drought (and to ignorance), I took a chance and dragged over seven acres of the field with a heavy harrow, the broadcast a mixture of clover and rye-grass seeds. I thought would have hay the following summer, of green barley mixed with clover and rye-grass.

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As for the rest of the barley field, wild pheasants and half-wild turkeys grew plump on it. So did the pigeons, which came in their hundreds.

The turkeys were brought down to the farm premises. Christmas was near. Some were bought by a local dealer; others went in rush-baskets to friends and acquaintances in London and elsewhere, ready plucked, trussed and delivered for 1s. 6d. a pound. At night, wandering round the woods, I missed the dark shapes against the moon which had been our 'tarkies' roosting in the tree-tops.

Chapter Forty-seven

WILDFOWLING



Almost every hedge of the farm, and certainly every wood, was suddenly the hiding and feeding place of woodcock. They began to arrive just before Christmas, on the wind which blew across the North Sea from Scandinavia.

They came in twos and threes, low over the ragged white tops of wind-rolling waves. I saw several flop into the marram grasses of the low sand dunes. They fell almost directly, as though shot, and crouched still, their long bills touching the sand.

As though shot is a bad simile, for a shot woodcock drops formlessly, wings loose, whereas these tired birds dropped each with a sudden little swoop; no flying round for a place to alight on; they pitched as soon as they reached land. They were very tired. I got to within a yard of one before it rose again.

Occasional shots came from the wide and dull extent of the marshes, which stretched east and west for many miles.

My farm, half a mile from the sea, with its meadows below the level of the coast road, then fields and woods sloping to hills a hundred feet high, is a natural sanctuary for migrant birds. There is the river; the grupps or dykes grown with watercress and other weeds; and beyond them the old river, which drained the valley before the new river was cut about a century ago.

One afternoon, as I walked under the long, narrow wood called the Entries, which lay below Hilly Piece and almost came down to the old river, I put up, in half a mile, forty-three woodcock. One bird after another arose in strong, whirring flight, on brown leaf-mottled wings, and flew down the river, by the

edge of the chestnuts and sycamore trees. They had been feeding in the damp leaf mould, probing for worms, whose underground movements they felt with the nerves of their long sensitive bills.

At twilight I stood under the island wood of Five Acre Carr, by Saint John's Pasture, watching the pigeons coming home to roost. Most of them were blue stock doves, or rock pigeons, which had migrated from Norway in the late autumn, with the grey hoodie crow. More than a thousand were wheeling into the tree-tops, their crops filled with clover from the field beyond the skyline trees of Hang High Wood.

I thought of the hours we had spent sowing that clover, which was to be hay next June for the bullocks to feed on the following winter. A thousand pigeons in an afternoon would take the best part of an acre of clover; and there were the flocks in the Hang High Wood, and those in Fox Covert, too!

Pigeon pie, I told myself, was good eating, and there were six hungry mouths at home. So I raised my grandfather's gun, with its worn damascene barrels, and pulled the trigger. To my surprise, two birds fell.

Since 1921, when the main food of myself and two spaniels and two cats and other animals in a Devon cottage had been rabbits, the gun had hardly been used.

More pigeons came over, and two more fell. Again I was surprised. That made four—enough for our pie. They went into the bag.

As I stood there I heard banging in the next meadow, where some of my neighbours, I knew, were standing inside empty sherry barrels let into the ground. The last time I had shot a duck was in 1921, when I had hit at a distance of about eighty yards a duck flying over a field. It had fallen down. I had picked it up. It had looked at me with astonishment and then flown off again, leaving its tail in my hand. Later I had seen it in the pond behind the rectory garden, where it was quapping and tipping happily with its brethren—other tame ducks whose evening habit was a flight over the fields.

One day, I told myself, I must bury a sherry barrel in my meadow, beside the grupp, and sit in it, and loose off at wild duck fighting at twilight.

Meanwhile, what was that passing in the grey sky? Six or seven of them. I fired and one fell down. I ran to pick it up. A mallard with green head and blue slash on wings, my first Norfolk wild duck.

As I went home I saw woodcock flying up and down below the Entries Wood, in the twilight. But I had enough in my bag for Sunday's dinner, and left them their sanctuary.

I thought I had outgrown my desire to shoot; but I discovered that I had no feelings about killing game birds for food. Nevertheless, I did not shoot often, but preferred to walk in freedom, without the necessity of having to do something.

One afternoon, shortly after Christmas, as I was walking over the marshes, my feet squelching on the salt turf of low tide, a yellow owl got up before me. I watched it beating away across the creeks of the wide and level place. It turned into the wind and rose in a great spiral and soared higher and higher, more like a hawk than an owl. It was watching below for movement of small bird, rat, or mouse. Then it came down low again, and flew past me in soft but decisive flight, turning its head and giving me an impersonal glance as it veered inland and beat over the barley stubbles.

It seemed to have no fear of me, and very little curiosity. Perhaps it was weary after its long sea journey, its eyes dazed with salt of the brown wave-tops; for it had come aslant the wind which for a night and two days had been blowing across England from the west.

I hoped no-one would shoot it: for the attitude along the north Norfolk coast still seemed to be that of the pre-war, or even pre-Boer War, towards birds.

If they were good to eat, they would be shot by wild-fowlers; if not good to eat, the thought would be, 'What's the use of it?' and the trigger pressed.

So the migrant owl crumples and falls, and is picked up for a moment, very soft and limp, and strangely light for so large-seeming a bird: all feathers, smoke-yellow and dead-reed mottled, softer than velvet, for silent flight over mice and voles, which have the sharpest hearing.

During my first autumn in Norfolk I saw a woodcock owl

fall shot among the marram grasses near the edge of the sea, where small sand-dunes are being made by the east winds. On the owl's back, clinging to its feathers, was a tiny bird. It was a fire-crested wren, exhausted by the long journey from Scandinavia. Already the owl's eyes, with staring yellow rings around the dark pupils, were filmy with death; the head fell back when the gunner picked it up; there was a spot of bright blood on its breast.

'Yes, they always shoot them round about here,' he said, in reply to a question, adding, 'What's the use of them?'

Birds of prey, song birds, hoodie crows, bitterns, starlings, robins, all the migrants of winter flying to England from over the North Sea, have only one thought—to reach land.

The smallest birds have no fear of the owls or harriers which fly among them. It is so in a forest or prairie fire; the fox runs beside the hare, the lion lying down with the lamb. And over the grey wastes of the windy sea, a tired firecrest, with body scarcely bigger than a hazel nut, finds sanctuary among the thick feathers of the dreaded short-eared owl.

Warmed in the hands, the mite with the vermilion streak on its head opened its eyes and flitted away over the marshes.

There is a sequel to that incident; for as I was walking there again, little more than a year later, among the winter-dull plants of sea-lavender and purslane, I saw the head of a gunner rise up before me, and then he clambered from a creek where he had been hiding—waiting for curlew or stint or mallard, or whatever chanced to fly past him—and said, with the simplicity of the blue-eyed East Anglian: 'I didn't like to shoot that owl, 'bor, for fear I med kill the li'l old totty thing ridin' 'long with him.'

A pleasing remark, and one which shows, in my experience, how the human mind learns and broadens itself. Before this I had felt a mild hostility to, or resentment against, the unimaginative attitude of the man, whom I saw occasionally about the village, and had found it difficult to say a genial good morning to him, but now I felt we would be friends.

Tot, by the way, is the equivalent of the Devon *tacker*. A small boy or pony is a *tot*. A rainstorm is *tempest*, leggings are *buskins*, a careless workman is a *slobberer* or *bodger*, a good

craftsman a *tradesman*. When you enter a cottage they say, 'Sit your down, 'bor.' 'Bor' is short for neighbour.

On which note I will end this chapter, sitting by the fireside of my new wild-fowler friend, and drinking a cup of tea with him. It was cold on those marshes, but the wind was a grand companion.

Chapter Forty-eight

FLOOD



Towards 1 a.m. great blows of wind on the southern wall of my cottage awoke me. I turned on the electric light and lay with eyes half-closed. The window was shut. It faced south. Rain was slashing down the glass panes, and water bubbling up under the window frame. Wind suddenly screamed through a crack in the plaster of the coving ceiling behind my head—a new crack. The cottage was built, by the date carved on the south wall, in 1720. The original rafters had probably been cut from a coppice and they were bored and rebored by the woodworms of many generations. I did not have time last year to re-roof this cottage. Would it hold in the gale?

My eyes were now accustomed to the white light. Wind was now pouring in behind my head, in a thin cold stream. Between me and the rain was a layer of old pantiles, resting on the decayed rafters and held there by thin battens. The rafters were about three inches thick. On their undersides were strips of wood less than a quarter of an inch thick, covered with plaster. That was all.

The buffets of the gale made the cottage shudder. As I stared, I saw that the ceiling overhead was moving. It was moving up and down. The ceiling was expanding and contracting. Was this the wind under the tiles; or was the south wall swaying? I knew buildings did sway in the wind: I'd been up the Empire State Building in New York, which had swayed several feet. But could my south gable wall be moving? Even half an inch sway on the foundations would cause the up-and-down movement of the lath-and-plaster ceiling. If so, the leaning wall was thrusting the purlins—which supported the rafters—against the

chimney breast that stood out in the second bedroom, where my small son was sleeping.

The wind was thundering terrifically. I wondered what would happen if the wall fell in. A cubic yard of flints weighed a ton and a quarter. I reckoned the flint wall was half a yard thick and ten feet above bedroom floor level, and the bedroom was five yards long. About four cubic yards of flint and brick would crash in on me, as well as hundreds of wet tiles. Well, if they did, they did. I put out the light, and went to sleep again.

In the morning it was still raining. From the window, as I shaved, I saw the meadows of my neighbour grey-white with wrinkled water. The river was over the banks. The Silver Eagle had been standing outside the cottage all night, and as soon as I had had breakfast, I got into it and went down to the farm. Not to the buildings first: but along the road which lay above the river, and was the boundary to the meadows. The meadows were now lagoons or lakes. The haystack we had made last June, and placed on the highest hump of the Home Meadow, was lapped about by miniature waves. Ducks were swimming in their new sanctuary, safe from the wild-fowlers' guns.

It was windy going along the road above the river. The car lurched about. The hood was up, which in a way was unfortunate, for an extra crash of wind at the corner caught it and tore it off the windscreen. The wooden frame had long been broken, and the material was rotten; and I went along with a kind of large faded black banner flapping behind me. When I stopped I thought I could do better than the wind, and ripped it all off. It was time I had a new one, anyway. The wind, possibly resenting my interference, pulled it out of my hands as I was folding it up and flung it in the river below.

All the meadows were flooded—Saint John's Pasture, Mary's Meadow, Lark's Bush, Camping Hill, and Home Meadow. I had heard that under the peat of the Home Meadow a Viking's galley was buried, and wondered if the flood would uncover its wooden ribs. So far, the river had not yet burst any part of its banks. They were made of rammed chalk, and would stand many days, for the meadows were the same level as the river bed.

Our two ponies, one a small Shetland and the other a wild unbroken thing with flying mane and tail, bought on impulse at

an auction a year previously, were up on the sloping field of Spong Breck. The wind was blowing icily, and the ponies had hidden themselves under the lee of the Hang High Wood. Having seen that they were all right, I went back to the farm buildings. What about the lambing fold, built of bundles of baled straw and hurdles, in the paddock? The water was creeping up. Would it reach them? Jimmy said it might, or again, it might not. That seemed to be entirely true, so I decided I could do nothing except shift the bales and hurdles and poles and make another one in the chalk quarry.

Our ewes were on the hills above the premises. I went up to see them. There were twenty-four; I was used to counting them, since the one we lost by turning over on its back and choking itself. The ram was among them. He was a bit 'tisky', as the boys would say. The wind had livened him. Seeing me, he stared; then walked backwards a few paces, preparatory to charging me. Rams fight by taking backward paces, measuring one another, then charging forward, head down. Crack! and their skulls are thick, too. They go on like that until one is beaten, which means, in some cases, that the neck is broken.

I was not interested in being taken for another ram, nor in testing the strength of my thigh-bones against a bruiser's head, so I turned away. That was fatal. My pedigree £10 10s. Hampshire Down ram came at me right away. I ran to the shelter of a thorn-tree, and seeing a stick lying on the ground, picked it up. Advancing with shouts upon the ram, I daunted him, then getting close, caught hold of the wool on his neck and lifted him up. Immediately he was a young lamb again, expecting a piece of biscuit or fragment of fattening ground-nut cake—which he had had before going to the Great Wordingham Sheep Fair last September. I scratched his ears, then left him. Later, Jimmy did not see him by the thorn-tree, and was butted over from behind.

Meanwhile I went across the hills to Twenty-one Acres, to see how the straw stacks had fared in the wind. Had they been blown away? I had seen a straw stack spread across a field after a gale on the high ground. But the stacks were safe; the precaution of hanging sheep-netting, weighted with logs, over the gable ends, had saved them.

From the Hang High bullock yard—built among the trees to save the carting of dung up the steep hill from the big yards below—I returned to the premises. Bob had brought the mare and foal off the home meadow, and put them in the pig yard. The sows were shut up in an adjoining box, lest as he said, ‘they cut up the li’l old foal’. It was raining hard all this time, the first real rain I had felt since leaving the West Country nearly two years before. If the rain kept on, the flood-water held back by the tide, behind the wooden doors of the culverts under the sea-wall, would press back along the course of the old river, and deepen the lakes over the meadows.

Jimmy came to me, and asked ‘What about the tarkey that’s setting?’ I had forgotten about that. One of the turkey poultz had broken the rules, and had laid eggs in January. Secretly she had made a nest under a bramble bush, and had been sitting on them as though it were April. Jimmy said the water was just about up to the nest. What ought he to do about it? Together we went to see the bird. We had to walk through water to get to her. She was on an islet, about two square yards in area. On one side was a ditch filled with running brown water; on the other, the flooded jungle of thorn and willow adjoining the river. The water was rising, and a few inches from the edge of the nest. The bird was asleep, her head tucked into her shoulder feathers. She was wet and draggled. What a time to bring delicate little chicks into a watery world! We must do something about it. Would she desert if we raised the nest on straw, I asked Jimmy. He said she might do that. Well, could we take the eggs, and hatch them any other way? Was our incubator, that we’d bought three months ago at a sale, repaired? Not yet.

It was my fault; I had meant to do it; one of a hundred pressing things. No incubator. Well then, what were the chances of the river rising or falling?

We began to weigh the chances of the water rising no further. First, the moon was growing smaller, so the tides were growing smaller. To set against this, was the fact that the north-east wind would pile up the seas behind the sea-wall doors, and so the mass of confined water would tend to rise with the river flowing into it. Now the nest was three inches below the flood level. The tide was then at its highest. In fifty years Jimmy had

never known a turkey sit in January, and he was anxious to have a record. The dilemma was, either to raise the nest and risk the bird's forsaking it: or leave her alone, and risk the eggs being chilled by the rising water. Dare we raise the nest? Would the river fall in time? Jimmy watched while I calculated. In a few hours, when the tide was ebbcd, it would be pouring out of the doors in the sea-wall; until then, the water would rise. The water was flowing at five miles an hour: twelve cubic yards were passing every second: the distance to the sluice-gates was 2,400 yards: the doors would open in two hours, fifty minutes' time: and taking into consideration these facts, or non-facts, well . . .

My calculations were almost as bogged as the turkey.

Jimmy had a try. He was muttering about wind and tide and rain and grupps and tarkies when with a whooshing sound one of the elm-trees a few yards away went down right across our new road. Two thorns, probably three hundred years old, had been blown down in the night. Despite the crashing and rending of branches, the hen turkey continued to sleep with her head under her wing.

Our calculations coming to naught (thus further discrediting 'theory' in Jimmy's eyes) we decided to wait and see if the water would rise any more, and went away to get the cross-cut saw and the axes.

In the bullock yards I observed with pleasure that the drains we put in last year had taken all the rain away. No water was lying about anywhere. The concrete roads were clean, the yards themselves neat with straw, in which bullocks contentedly munched. The drains worked perfectly. Indeed, when I turned the corner, I saw they worked too perfectly. Most of the valuable liquid manure in them had been washed down the pipes, into the hollow of the old pond which had taken the water in former times. We had planned to make a large underground liquid manure tank there, and to pump out the stuff periodically into a big barrel and spray it on the grasslands. With Sam's departure this and most of the other schemes had fallen through.

The pigs were in one yard, shut off with hurdles. I stopped and watched them. I had thirty-four now, all from our three pedigree Large White sows, except two, which were strangers.

I had bought them one day from a small-holder, while passing his allotment in the Silver Eagle. They were little black boar pigs, and had ridden back in the car with me, sleeping on my lap. They were introduced to the families of Large Whites, to play and feed with them, and the best boar to be chosen for breeding.

At first the pink piglets had been scared of the black strangers, and had stampeded about the straw-strewn bays. Soon, however, they had settled down. Under Jimmy's sensitive care, and pig-meal at £8 10s. a ton, they grew well. When they were three months old, we put them on a diet of boiled wheat and barley, mixed with a little meal. The barley was from our unsold Fox Covert harvest, and I bought the wheat at 9s. 6d. a coombe, or £2 7s. 6d. a ton. We used our own wood for fuel, and though the pigs grew slowly, they were "arning the guv'nor money".

They seemed to enjoy life, romping amidst the straw. This was uneconomic perhaps. I knew that a pig was but a food-making machine, and that to grow quickly he must eat and sleep; but my scientific schemes were gradually being eliminated by reality. I hoped to alter things on the Old Castle farm when I came; but they were altering me instead. I was indeed, in Jimmy's phrase, 'larning'. When would we have proper fattening houses? Never, at the present rate of progress. So the pigs were in the yards, under cover of the sloping tiled roofs, and at least they were warm on the straw. Warmth was as important as sleep. And what fun they had with the straw! One pig delighted to bury his head in it, then to reappear with a wide mouthful, plunging about and daring the other piglets to take it from him. They scampered after him, and he plunged into the straw again, and hid. Other games were in progress, notably one which seemed to be a variation of 'Mothers and Fathers'. A little gilt lay on her side, as though she were a sow, while others tried to push her over with their snouts: she lay with a blissful expression on her face, with shut eyes, obviously imagining the joys of motherhood. Another pig took delight in scaring the others, for suddenly he gave a grunt of mock alarm and set them all off stampeding for cover. They huddled together, and were completely still. Not for long, though; soon

the games started again, the chasing and mothering, the hide and seek and the pulling of ears. I left them, feeling they were doing well, and sheltered from the rain which still poured down, while the pines and beeches on the hilltop roared with the blast.

At noon the rain stopped, but the river continued to rise. Jimmy and I decided to raise the turkey's nest, and in the afternoon we went down to the islet, which was now almost covered. We carried each a sackful of rootlets of a tree we had recently felled above the chalk quarry, and returned for armfuls of straw, setting them down on the few square feet of undrowned land round the nest. Then Jimmy urged the bird off the old nest, while I stood on the other side of the flooded ditch with a scoop of boiled corn. She flew over the ditch, stood about disconsolately, then, seeing the grain, began to walk slowly towards it. After the first pick she started to feed more alertly. While she filled her crop Jimmy built the nest two feet higher, first the roots as foundation, then the straw to make a warm bowl, in which he set the eggs. When we left, the turkey flew back again, and settled at once on the eggs. She must have felt cheerful in such a snug nest, and after such a good meal; for half-boiled corn is easily digestible, and also barley is a heat-making food. In the pallor of twilight we left her, confident that the water would not reach the eggs.

The next morning the meadows were still flooded, but the river had dropped back, as salmon fishermen say, and was now just below its banks. It kept this level for two days; then the fall was rapid. Our seventy acres of lake and lagoon changed back to the same old meadows; but with one difference. Instead of spoiling them, by leaving them water-logged so that the young grass would not be able to grow later on in spring, the floods had actually done them good. The force of the water in the old river had scoured part of its bed of weeds and silt. I had planned, one day, to use the force of winter floods, systematically dammed by boards held by chains to posts, to clean the bed of silt.

After the floods, came the frosts. The turkey had a tough job to hatch her eggs, and only two hatched. We put her in a dry place, and she reared her two chicks.

Chapter Forty-nine

SNOW



Dully over the white snow came the reports of the wild-fowlers on the marshes. The wind pouring from the north-east at last is still.

What a wind! A wind-frost they call it up here on the north Norfolk coast; a wind of invisible blackness, a colour-killing wind, making all things seem thin and still.

On the third morning it had closed the river, and the duck came in from the marshes. All along the sombre line of the coast they were fighting, coming in from the sea, fleeing from the bitter weather driving down from the Pole.

Then, with the wind dropping, the snow fell, and in the morning everything was white—tiled roofs of barns and cottages, roads, trees, fields, hedges—a new white world.

My son and I got a lift into the coastal town four miles away, did our Christmas-present buying in the little, old-fashioned shops, and decided to walk back along the coast.

It was half-past three, but a distinct pallor made sky and earth equal. I thought it would remain light until six o'clock.

We set out beside the marshes, and the tide swelled with ice and slush moving silently in the creeks. Our feet crushed in the snow and the low bushes of sea-blite.

Dare we try the broken footbridge over the creek? In summer it was a feat to try that bridge, with its main bearers shaky and great rusty nails sticking up where the cross planks had fallen.

Now we looked at the brown water and the dirty lacings of tide-froth and slush, and measured the ten feet of narrow nail-projecting beam to be walked like a tight-rope, a six-foot drop

to water under. The beam was only two and a half inches wide. If one of us fell in, he would freeze in the water, and perhaps the two of us would drown. So we walked half a mile round the creek, and across a bleak stubble-field with its hare-paths marked in the snow, and came to the edge of the marshes again.

We walked east faster as the pallor became plumbeous, and we heard the sweet triple-whistle of the redshank, the bird disliked by wild-fowlers, as it is sharp-eyed and keen-eared, and cries the alarm before other birds.

A gun banged flatly out there and far away, four or five miles across the level white waste, seemingly under a black mass of cloud rising from the east—the heavy report of an 8-bore goose-gun.

Seldom had I seen such a louring mass of cloud. We hastened on, and were half-way home when the edge of the cloud reached us. A bitter twisting wind drove the snow into our eyes; the thorn hedge and the line of furze bushes between the marsh and the fields were dissolved in our sight. We walked forward with heads bowed, eyes half-shut, and holding hands. Two miles to go.

We could not discern levels or humps in the white ground before us, and often stumbled over. I nearly bumped into a figure groping along, dog at heels, an old single-barrel breech-loader under one arm, scarf round head, and a bunch of widgeon and mallard in the other hand. We shouted at one another, the snow whirling between us and the wind breaking some of our words. I gathered that skein after skein of wild-fowl were flying in from the sea.

On we went, the left sides of our faces, exposed to the wind and prickle-drive of snow, feeling as though the flesh had been rived with a knife and the bone exposed.

Then we were falling, and rolling down the side of one of the old-time loam-pits opened by the legendary Coke of Norfolk. Would it ever be used again? Perhaps so; when England once more was ruled by Englishmen with freed imaginations.

We walked by a wind-bearing on the left cheekbone. At last we came to the end of the prolonged blur of snow-dimmed hedge, and saw the black posts of the wire fence put there a year before, when emplacements for anti-aircraft practice

batteries were built on the barley field. It was near home; and I was glad, for the feet of the small boy beside me were dragging.

Silently, in a voiceless world of white, we crossed the fields and came to Hollow Lane, and so to the village street glimmering in starlight; and we saw again the small familiar yellow squares and rectangles of the cottage windows. The snow had stopped, the wind was quiet. No noise or headlights of cars; it was an old English village again.

I wanted to take the silence, and the rare peacefulness, to myself, and leaned against a flint wall to think back into the past; and hark! up there in the sky, *cronkle-honkle honk-cronkle*, not harsh, or strident, but soft, meditative, *jingle-cronkle honkle-cronkle*, marvellous sound! star-talk of the wild geese flying inland to their feeding-fields.

Chapter Fifty

RETURN TO THE WEST



21 May 1939.

The winter is past, the fields are ploughed and cultivated, the seed-beds are made, the corn is sown. The swallows have returned from Africa, and the cuckoo calls among the new green leaves of the beech-trees rising above the farm buildings. Our lambs are on the hillside, and the sun shines on a new earth.

To-day I am doing nothing at all.

The sun shines in the open farmhouse door, and through the latticed window I see the honeysuckle in flower over the woodshed. For the first time for two years, I am entirely idle.

It is May 1939, the second anniversary of my arrival at the Old Castle Farm. This is a cool white room, with an open brick fireplace and a beam of chestnut running across the ceiling. There are red tiles on the floor, clean and polished. The open door shines with new pale green paint. Immediately outside, there is a porch, and then another pale green door leading into a small but pleasant kitchen with white walls and azure blue paint on doors and window sills.

There is an electric pump for the water, with automatic switch in the tank; a new electric oven and cooker which delivers the best food I have tasted. Thank you, Loetitia.

Perhaps the food tastes all the better because some of it was grown on our own farm. Eggs, bacon, our own hams, own beef, chickens, potatoes, salads. We grind our own corn, and bake our own bread. Our bees give us honey.

Water comes from the old well outside, a rounded brick affair with windlass and chains and oaken buckets. It looks nice seen through the window, a relic of olden time. Olden time

being two years ago, when this cottage was still a place of decadence, shut away from the air and light of nature.

Was I wise or foolish to have begun the Norfolk venture? I do not know. Am I glad or sorry I became a farmer? I cannot tell. My life is made of gladness and sorrow, wisdom and foolishness; and truly, I cannot answer my own questions. I know only that what I have done, I have done.

Two years ago, exactly to this day, Sam and I set off from Devon in the old lorry, drawing a two-ton trailer, and the Silver Eagle pulling the caravan. My enthusiasm was only equalled by my anxiety.

In six months, I told the assembled family, there will be a nice home for you, and Sam and I will have got the hang of farming, and our life will be full of interest. We opened a bottle of champagne and drank to the future.

In six months the partner was gone, there was neither stock nor equipment, the roads were unfinished, the cottages were unfinished, no hope of a farmhouse for months, perhaps years; and the north wind was howling over the frozen wastes of the fields. It was a hard life, that first winter, living in a ruined granary, three grown-ups and six children. We washed in the river, and huddled at night round the slow combustion stove.

With almost startling suddenness the white room, with its big latticed window, and roses and honeysuckle outside, is filled with song. A pair of swallows are building a nest on one of the rafters above the porch. They fly in and out a few inches past our heads as we come and go under the low brick arch. They roost there at night. We see their tails and heads, close together. Jimmy, the dear fellow who looks after our cows and calves and pigs and sheep, and in his spare time traps rats and hoes sugar-beet and cuts nettles and feeds the kittens, said anxiously, 'You won't poke that nest down, will you, guv'nor?' For years Jimmy has been watching young swallows in the cowshed. He says they return there every year, all the way from Africa.

How does Jimmy know that, I wonder? For usually Jimmy knows only what he has seen, cautiously; and I am sure Jimmy has not flown to Africa and back with a swallow. But maybe Jimmy has: his instinct is true, if ever a man's was.

At night the smell of honeysuckle is sweet in this room. The farm house table is eleven feet long; it was made in Cromwell's time, of oak slabs. For two years it stood in the granary, and in one place mice gnawed the polish off it.

The polish was made of bees'-wax and linseed oil, and must have been very tasty.

As I look back on the past two years, I am glad they will not come again. For one period, of about three months, I thought I would not be able to keep on. During those months I worked on the farm by day, taught myself the building trade (buying the usual experience), drove the tractor, was continually striving to give others a new outlook, and often wrote until one or two o'clock in the morning, to keep things going. Money was gone, wages and bills had to be met. Our chief crop, barley, found a collapsed market.

That period is past. To-day the weeds in most of the fields are gone. A fine wheat plant is rising on Hilly Piece. The lambs are fat on the hills. The cows and heifers in the meadows are sleek and healthy. Hundreds of chickens and turkeys roam the woods and hedges. Eleven calves skip in the paddock where once again the wild white clover—tell-tale of fertility returning—is rising thick. And Loetitia can wash up in hot water, and have a real bath, lying down!

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I slipped away in the old car as soon as Bob had got two extra men for sugar-beet hoeing. It was the first crop I had sown, and we had a good plant. Having doubts about the seed-bed the night before drilling, I got up early; and with the pitch-pole harrow drawn by the tractor, and an old one-horse roll hitched behind the harrow, I started at 3 a.m. and saw the sun rise, and finished at 9 a.m., when the drill came up and I went home to breakfast.

There were ten acres in all. Bob sowed most of it in the first week of April, in lines or 'drills' two feet apart. There was much charlock—wild mustard—in the field, and when the green weeds began to smother the sugar-beet plants, about an inch high in mid-June, I began to be anxious. Aerodromes and anti-aircraft camps, built by big firms from the big towns, were

springing up in the district, offering nearly double pay to the farm labourer; and labour was scarce.

Hoeing is about the hardest job on a farm. For hours a man stands in the hot sunshine, with bent back and intent eye, moving slowly down the 'ringes', or rows, and striking deft blows of the hoe-blade at thistles, charlock, docks, and pushing or chopping at every four-leaved sugar-beet plant except one—the best plant—every ten inches or so. As most of the plants have stems only about one-sixty-fourth of an inch thick, and could be covered by half a postage stamp, it is a strain on the eye to work, bent-backed, for eight and ten or more hours at a time.

Usually hoeing is done by contract, the men taking plots of ten rings at a time. The price was 3½d. for every hundred yards. In fine warm weather the weeds grow faster and bigger than the beet plants. If a farmer has not enough men, by the time his field is half done, the weeds may have smothered the plants, and be several inches high. Hence Bob's anxiety to get enough labour.

At night, having worked all day with the men in the field, Bob managed to get two old men to help. One had bad feet, after sixty-five years of constant labouring; but though he could not walk fast or far, he could stand upright. The other had an arm withered by shrapnel in the Great War, but he was willing to work. Being a cripple he was not usually employed; but I was glad to see an old soldier on my farm. When it was settled, I packed the Silver Eagle with war-time sleeping-bags, and food basket, and with windscreen flat and goggles over eyes, turned my face to the west.

With what joy did the engine hum past the green hedges, while I felt my eyes to clear, and my heart to grow light as the kestrel soaring with the wind!

Most of the way I sat in the bucket-seat without a coat, while along the straight roads of the Brecklands and across the flats of Cambridge the engine bounded us forward at a steady sixty. Ten years ago (over one hundred and fifty thousand miles) this all-British car left the Coventry factory, but I could not part with it. It was part of my life, and had a soul, which is a sense of continuity. If we were destined to die together, let it be now; so open the throttle and hear once again the roar of wind in the

ears. Seventy . . . seventy-four . . . and the needle quivered there. Oil pressure only 10 lbs., those big ends and journals were worn oval, and the oil spurted through them fast.

I thought with joy of seeing again the rich brown and red fields of Devon, after the light sandy soils of East Anglia; and the tall cliffs and the green Atlantic rollers after the flat fields and marshes by the dull North Sea. I longed to feel again the wet south-west gale, the salt salmon-rains of ocean, after the dry shear of the east winds; and to hear once more the soft burring voices of the west after the hard shrill clipped tones of the east. It would be strange to meet again the Celtic slyness after the single-mindedness of the blue-eyed Nordic amalgam. And what would the Bray look like, so clear and sweet after two years.

The rivers of East Anglia are deep, slow, muddy; the West Country streams are murmurous and rapid, cool with rocks and ferns and brown pools. The sunsets of the east are small, intimate, only a section of the sky, though the light is of a surpassing clarity; in the west the sun sinks down to the Atlantic in a great conflagration of fire, filling sea and sky with a sense of eternity.

A new happiness came to me with the thought that all these things were England, and the roads lay continuous, always open. How fortunate was I, to be free to move like this, how glad to be an heir to this beauty!

Through Buckingham and onwards to Oxford, then the grey-green downs of Wiltshire, Swindon, Chippenham, and down the long hill into Bath, a turn left-handed up the other side of the same hill, and over the Mendips with their grey-stone cottages and mines and quarries; into the declining sun and to Shepton Mallet and so to Glastonbury and on past what must be one of the last toll bridges in the West Country; and into a shining mist of westering sunshine over the rhines and withy-plots of Sedgemoor and at last to the red fields of the vale of Taunton.

And again to the long familiar run across high ground with the brown line of Exmoor against the northern sky, down the wooded slopes to the valley of the Exe and up again to the top of the world. How lush green was the grass! The west has

about sixty inches rainfall a year, the east only twenty. The dry climate makes the barley ripen hard, wrinkled, and yellow, yielding fine malting samples; while the west fattens its bullocks on the luxuriant grass of the Atlantic rains. I began to see a new West Country as I travelled towards the sunset. I had left a weary writer, I was returning a keen farmer. The man of the past had lamented the death of wild flowers in a meadow, as the swathes fell under the scythe or mowing machine; the man of the present noted many of these now as weeds, taking the air and nutriment of more useful clovers and grasses. And noted particularly how a few of the pastures of the west were being improved, by having been ploughed up and re-sown.

So I saw again the little dark landmark of the church of South Molton lying away in the golden fume of the ocean sunset; and I passed through the old town, and so to the road over the bridge of the river Bray flowing down the valley where I had dwelt for many years, in the thatched house where most of the children were bred. Something in the valley mist seemed to rise to greet me as I went slowly past, in the meditative dusk: for a piercing moment I stood by the bridge, and my eyes dropt their tribute salt—and then onwards, faster, to Barnstaple and the road beside the gleaming estuary, through the new village of Braunton and up the steep sunken lanes to the village I knew better than any place on earth. Three hundred and twenty miles, and I was home again, on the dear earth of Devon.

There in the inn I saw the familiar faces and found a new aspect in them, one that before I had not fully perceived: for these men knew how to plough, cultivate, sow, reap, tend beasts and lay hedges and make ditches, even as I was learning. They were masters or journeymen, I an apprentice. I came among them as a newcomer, keen to talk about ploughs and seeds and grasses and bullocks, just as nearly a quarter of a century ago I had come among them as a boy from school eager to learn where the buzzards nested, and where was the best place to see the badgers. Perhaps there was a bit of hoeing I could do, to give some small-holder a helping hand?

I discovered a new comradeship in the village. There was much to talk about. I wandered round the fields, especially the

pastures, and pretended to myself I was farming them, and what I would do to improve the feeding value of the grasses. I saw a jackdaw flying out of a farmyard, and recalled how indignant I had been, years before, when a farmer had shot one as it was going into a hen-house. But now I knew how it felt to have a nest of eggs taken and sucked by the black rascals, and merely thought, Well, if you can get away with it, good luck to you, but if you cop a packet from the farmer, it's all the same to me.

I went down to the sands, and bathed, and sat on the tall lichened rocks, against which the high spring tides hurl the fountainous tops of the combers. Free of material thought, I wandered light as a wraith in the sunlit air, and was myself again, as when for days and weeks of that far-away May month my footprints were the only ones on the sand, except for the marks of the feet of gulls and wading birds. The waves and the sands were of no time, the gulls were immortal, the complaining cry of a kestrel flying along the face of the cliff, past the stunted shrub-like trees where the magpies flitted, told that the eyrie was in use as of old. It was the same beautiful country, despite the new houses on the hills and terraces above the shore. It was the same—ah, no, not quite the same. I thought of faces of friends that once were with me, in the summer of 1914 so long ago: had the revelation of truth in their deaths been lost? Then were the sands blank, and the seas salt, estranging: for what is the memory of one man before the immensity of the sea? Even the travail of a generation is lost in Time as shells on the shore of the world. The ideal is to see all things serenely, as the sun sees them: plain, without shadows.

After supper in the inn with old Charley and his wife—friends of whom the rare word *faithful* can be used—I climbed the hill to the spinney of beech-trees, and turned the key in the door of the hut lying under their shield from the wind. It was near midnight; but the afterglow of sunset was still above the Atlantic.

The white owl was flying over the field, silver grey in the moonlight, and the lighthouses of Hartland and Lundy were flashing over the sea. There was no dew, and it was warm in the long grasses. I lay on my back, and closed my eyes, and came as

near to bliss as any man can come in this world. I had earned my holiday; I had worked for this field; I had worked for my farm, all those coloured counties away to the east. And I thought of all I had seen during the day, being part of the same earth of England, and in me there was no division of spirit, no homesickness, and I would return after my holiday, and start work afresh, and harm no other man in the world by that work—growing food for my own sort, English people.

June 1937–August 1939.

EPIGRAPH



Since the events described, as faithfully as I know how, in the pages of this book, the British Government has gone to war with Germany. When that happened, I knew the end of the final phase of a period of industrialism, with its misery and anguish for so many millions of our people, was come; and I took my eldest son away from the public school which was educating him for a mode of life which was dead. He spent his fourteenth birthday ploughing his fourteenth acre. A nation which cares for its land and its people above all other things, will not perish.

One of the immediate results of the resumption of the Napoleonic trade war, of blockade and counter-blockade, was the increase in the price of home cattle and corn.

In 1938 we had nearly 60 acres of barley, which sold for £301; in 1939 we had only 10 acres of barley, 120 sacks or coombes, which sold for 35s. 6d. a coombe, or £213.

In the early spring we pulled out with the pitch-pole cultivator most of the docks which had grown and seeded on Fox Covert during many years. They lay on top of the seed-bed, and we picked up the brown tap-roots by hand. They filled nine sacks. In the barley which grew there several sprays of wild oat rose above the lawful corn, and we pulled them off as we went round the field with the reaping machine.

The Hang High in 1939 was bastard-fallowed, to kill the weeds, then mustard was sown, to be ploughed in when green and a seed-bed for September-sown wheat prepared. (It is high land, and cold in winter.) Unfortunately I took the advice to leave the mustard, 'to hold the bards'. The mustard was left, and it grew too tall and tough to be turned under by the tractor twin-furrow ploughs in November. After a shoot on a very rainy

day, when not a single pheasant arose, the steward and I borrowed a single-furrow deep-digger horse-plough and tried to use it behind the tractor. The ground was too sticky, and we abandoned the ploughing until later. More rain fell, and then came the hardest frost for a hundred years, followed by deep snow which lasted until March. The field as I write is growing barley which is nearly smothered by yellow mustard plants: a warning that one mind and one determination must direct the strategy of a farm, if it is to be successful.

In 1939 we had a grand yield of sugar-beet from the southern half of Twenty-one Acres. This crop was grown on 5 tons of pressed London sewage, purified by lime, spread on each acre; to which was added 5 cwt. of mixed fertilizer. We got 14½ tons of beet per acre, which brought in, after costs of railway and lorry transport had been deducted, the sum of £327 11s. 9d. Bob and his team worked hard and well, at hand-hoeing and horse-hoeing, and later, at lifting, topping, and hauling to the dump beside the new hard road.

Both the barley and the sugar-beet made a net profit of £10 per acre.

The wheat off Hilly Piece—‘thistley old sud that wouldn’t grow wheat’—was fine and strong in 1939. It was a joy to pick up the ruddy gold sheaves, heavy with corn. There was not one thistle seeding in the wheat at harvest. The 10 acres sown yielded 98½ coombes or sacks, which was sold at the Government price of 31s. 6d. per quarter of two sacks, or £77 11s. 4d. The subsidy on this was £42 13s. 3d.—in all £120 4s. 7d. This result would not have been possible without Mr. Ferguson’s magnificent tractor.

The rest of the farm crops were not good. The hay in 1938 had been badly sown, on droughty, cobbly seed-beds. It was badly harvested, the thin stalks left to lie too long in the sun. They were bleached of their aroma, which was their goodness. The trouble was that I could not always be there to order how things should *not* be done, since I had much writing and broadcasting, among other occupations; and ‘theory’ about non-cobbly seed-beds, aromatic hay, the early drilling of small-seeds, was almost entirely unacceptable by the static labouring mind.

I learned that the neglect and deterioration of national life during the twenty years following the Peace Treaty at Versailles

was manifest not only in the land, but in the minds and souls of the men working, or waiting to work, upon the land.

When I made up my balance sheet, for the second year, I found I had broken even.

During the two years of my occupation of Old Castle Farm, half the arable has been cleaned and given heart; the roads have been remade with more than a thousand tons of hard material; seven cottages have been made dry, light, and strong; four cuttings of the rushes and weeds in the seventy acres of the meadows have brought back the wild white clover; a hundred tons of dyke-silt spread on the thin or 'scald' patches of the arable; forty tons of firewood have been cut from a thousand yards of reclaimed hedges; three hundred tons of chalk have been spread on some of the fields, during which labour Gilbert the old horse, veteran of the Somme, fell down and died; the yards have been drained and fifty tons of concrete roads laid. Four men have been permanently employed, and all the reconstruction work has been done in addition to the ordinary farm work. During that period I wrote 400,000 words; and a synopsis and part of the scenario of a film play, based on the idea of my own experiences, called *Immortal Corn*, which a British producer (if any there be) may one day care to make.

As I write, the reeds and mud are being pulled from the grupps, to be put into compost heaps to rot, to be spread on the violated soil, to give it back health and strength, and thus to serve faithfully our people who get their living from it. The Government grant pays half the cost of this work.

In 1939, autumn, we spread three tons per acre of pressed London sewage on Spong Breck, and ploughed it in. The grant for ploughing the fifteen acres of old grass was £30. We sowed barley, and despite the long drought, a fair yield looked to be coming when last I saw it.

The pressed London sewage cost 15s. a ton, delivered on the farm.

On the Home Meadow nine cows and a bull are grazing; while thirty-eight younger beasts, all reared on the farm from calves, either bred or bought, are on the distant Saint John's Pasture. On Lark's Bush Meadow—where Windles found a cuckoo's egg in a titlark's nest in a rush-clump a few days ago—forty-two ewes and

fifty-four lambs are eating down the rough grass. A good crop of hay has been cut on Hilly Piece, from small-seeds sown in the wheat plant during April 1939, and the rubber-tyred tumbrils will carry it easily down the New Cut to the rick in the chalk quarry; where a new elevator, worked by the engine of the concrete-mixer, will bear it aloft. I hope we will save it in good condition. If so, it will be the first proper hay on the farm for years.

A dozen pyramids of heavy branches and split tree-trunks stand opposite the chaff barn and the engine house where is fixed the circular saw. The tractor engine will drive the shafting that turns chaff-cutter, barley-grinding mill, oat-roller, and saw. The family will not be cold in the winter, with the open hearths ablaze with logs of alder, oak, ash, and thorn.

And so I come to the end of the story of a Norfolk farm. It has not been an easy story, either to live or to write; but I would not have it otherwise.

I record my gratitude to the men who have worked hard, to make the reclamation possible; to my small son, who has worked long hours on the 'Fergie,' ploughing so well; and to all others who have helped in the struggle.

I write these final words while once again the ruined corn-fields of the Somme lie under the smoke of bombardment; and where some of the children I, a young soldier after the World War, knew and walked and talked with, have fallen in battle.

Would that I were with them. My old tunic hangs on its peg, reproaching me. It is not the young who should die: but the older generation, which has failed them.

One day the sewage of the cities will cease to be poured into the rivers, and will be returned to the land, to grow fine food for the people.

One day salmon will leap again in the clear waters of London river; and human work will be creative, and joyful.

One day the soul of man, shut in upon itself during the long centuries of economic struggle, will arise in the light of the sun of truth.

And now I lay down the pen, and return to the plough.

H.W.





